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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 1014.

BREAKING A BUTTERFLY

BY THE AUTHOR OF "GUY LIVINGSTONE."

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. 1.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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OR

Blanche Ellerslie's Ending.

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IN TWO VOLUMES

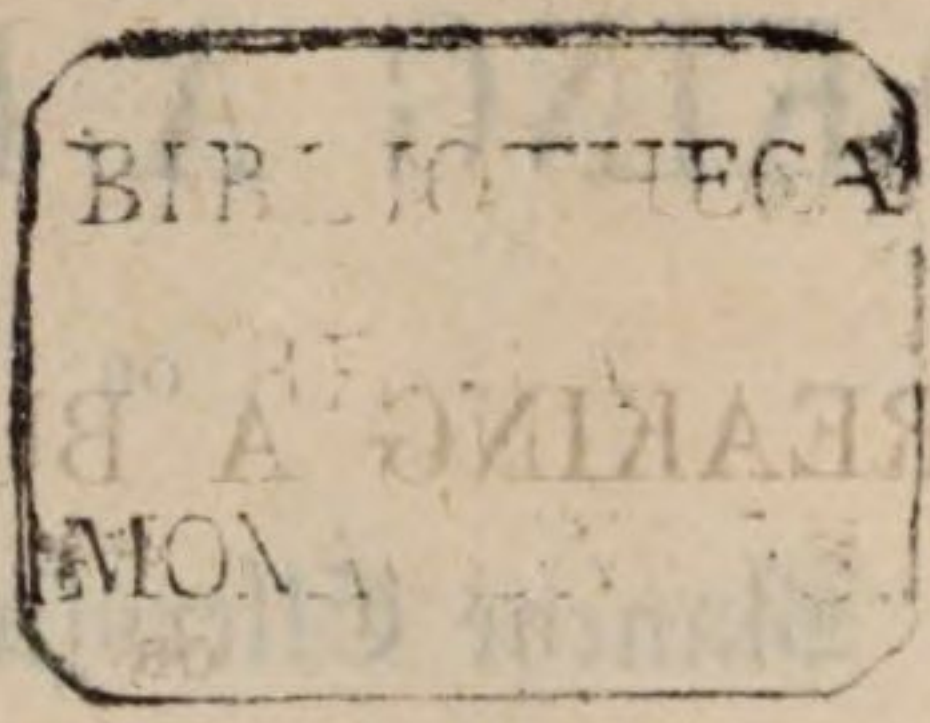
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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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BLANCHE ELLERBIE'S ENDING

CHAPTER I

ALL IS VANITY

These three words come often home to many who never willingly listen to sermon ever so short, or an under preacher ever so winning—ay, and to many of creeds, nations, and languages other than ours, who have not so much as heard of the name of Ecclesiastes. The world's kaleidoscope may shift as it will, with myriad changes of form and colour; but the centre-point of the prism bides steadfast and unaltered, round which is inscribed the trite old dreary text. I repeat amongst the illustrations of its truth are those trifling dissillusions—scarcely amounting to disappointments—that affect us when we confess that the reality falls somewhat short of the ideal; that the substance is something coarser in

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outline, or meaner in proportion, than the fore-shadowing.

Said a friend to me the other day:

“I have tramped and sailed over three parts of the globe now; and I never saw but one thing, alive or dead, that thoroughly answered its warranty—and that was a Cyclone. You must remember that, being an indifferent sailor at all times, I was just then in a state of mortal fear.”

Now, the man who thus expressed himself was of a temper neither sombre nor sanguine; not given to philosophy—cynical or otherwise; but one who went his way about the world in a quiet Odyssean fashion; taking the rough and the smooth as they came, and keeping, so far as I know, his heart whole and his digestion unimpaired.

Most of us—putting cases of exceptional luck aside—have thought, or will think, nearly the same. The mountain is lofty, yet not quite so stupendous—the river is romantic, yet winds not quite so picturesquely—the face is fair, yet not quite so lovely—as had been set forth by fancy or word-painting. In the after-time we may come to dwell in the shadow of that same mountain, and wax so jealous of its honour that we shall scarce allow there is its peer amongst the everlasting hills; we may float on that same river till we know and love

every rippling eddy and quiet pool, and swear that there flows seawards no pleasanter stream; we may look on that same face till we are ready to maintain against all comers its sovereignty in beauty. But,—if we go back honestly to our first impression of any wonder of nature or art that we have approached with expectation on the strain, we shall remember a faint reaction, like the slackening of a damped chord.

In the commonplace amusements and pleasures of life the apothegm holds specially good. Indeed, when some five hundred people, of different ages or sexes, attend any entertainment whatever that has been announced with a certain flourish of trumpets, the odds against some few of the number coming away disappointed are such as would puzzle Mr. Babbage, or the subtlest in the Ring, to compute.

On these premises it would seem a fact not less worthy of record than many set down in the *Annual Register*, that the first ball given at Nithsdale House, after the bride was brought home, was pronounced a thorough success by each and everyone who assisted thereat, from the royal Personage who, with infinite grace and agility, opened the first quadrille, down to the linkman without who, with a hoarse and unctuous blessing, sped the last of the parting guests.

The host himself would scarcely have claimed a share in the social triumph. Hugh, tenth Earl of Nithsdale, was a grave gentle person, now somewhat past middle age. He did not shine in ordinary conversation—though he could speak sensibly enough at need from his place in the House—and was too shy to be a general favourite. Nevertheless, few were better loved or esteemed by such as knew him thoroughly. In his nature there was not an atom of arrogance or self-assertion; but he was thoroughly imbued with the pride of caste, being more careful of the obligations than of the privileges of his order. From his youth upwards he had striven, in his own quiet fashion, to the uttermost of his power and light, to discharge his duty both to God and to his neighbour; and kept the Fifth not less religiously than the other commandments. So when his mother—widow of the ninth Earl—found a help-meet for her son soon after he came of age, Nithsdale showed no signs of rebellion or reluctance; though the damsel was something hard of feature and meagre of frame, and, to say the least of it, acidulated in temper. But then she was of stainless descent, and had wealth enough to parcel-gild richly a faded coronet.

For many years that couple plodded on together, peacefully if not happily. Indeed, after they had

once settled down into their places there was little chance of domestic jars: fretfulness was simply wasted on Nithsdale's placid temperament; and for domestic jealousy neither gave cause. The Earl never—so far as the nearest of his intimates knew—suffered his fancy to wander beyond bounds; and the Countess carried down to her grave a virtue absolutely unsullied.

There was born of this marriage only one sickly boy, who died in infancy. The lack of an heir perhaps troubled Nithsdale more than he cared to confess, even to himself: to such as are free from all taint of avarice, it is weary work laying up riches without knowing who shall gather them. Nevertheless, he slackened not a whit in the skill and care that he had displayed since he came of age in administering a vast encumbered patrimony; mortgage after mortgage was cleared off, acre after acre drained, farmstead after farmstead repaired, till the great Nithsdale estates not only were set free of burden, but in such order as to become an agricultural ensample far and near.

When he was left a widower, Hugh of Nithsdale felt his bereavement heavily. He had never himself cared for country sports, though he took care to provide them plentifully for his guests: his own relaxations were chiefly sedentary, of mildly

scientific kind; so that most of his time was spent within doors. Naturally, the absence even of that hard-featured face and spare angular figure made a dreary blank, both at fireside and board-head; and just as naturally, after a decent interval, the Earl began to reflect how that blank should be filled.

Perhaps he had never absolutely regretted the first alliance; yet he may have considered that in contracting it he had discharged all his duty to his house; and he determined, in wiving again, to please only his own fancy. Moreover, there was no privy-councillor, to insist on state-policy and the like, since his lady-mother went to her rest.

The union of January and May is so common nowadays that no one thinks of inditing epithalamia thereon, satiric or otherwise. Nevertheless there was a certain stir of wonderment in the great world when it became noised abroad that Lady Rose Marston was to be the second Countess of Nithsdale. In truth there were disparities betwixt the affianced pair seemingly more serious than that of age, though the bride was barely in her twentieth year.

She came of rather a wild stock, and her bringing-up had been none of the staidest. Her mother, Countess Daventry, once a famous beauty, had not

ceased to be dangerous and enterprising; and her father, though too lazy to be vicious, had never cared himself to practise any virtue, domestic or otherwise, and devoted all the energy he could muster to the mismanagement of his racing-stable, taking no thought as to the training of his olive-branches. From him the Lady Rose inherited the long sleepy brown eyes that never grew eager or troubled when a race on which a year's income hung was being won or lost by the shortest of heads; and the soft rich auburn hair, the envy of Lord Daventry's bald or grizzled compeers. There was much beauty in her face, but of the stillest, quietest kind; and it might have been inanimate but for the perfect little mouth, which, smiling often, smiled never unmeaningly. She was not particularly clever, nor a whit ambitious; and hereditary indolence would have prompted her to glide listlessly down the social stream, accepting such flowers as floated into her hands, yet not straining after such as grew out of her reach. But, early in her first season, a large mixed jury of natives and foreigners pronounced Lady Rose Marston one of the best *valseuses* in Europe.

In these days, most demoiselles endowed with lithe light figures, and a fair ear for music, dance—as our forefathers would have said—more or less

“divinely;” so, that one should be singled out and set above her sisters, involves some marked peculiarity. And Rose Marston’s waltzing *was* very peculiar. However rapid the whirl, she never lost the languid grace that distinguished her in repose; but, all the while, a practised eye, to say nothing of a practised arm, could detect, in all her movements, a latent energy and suppressed power. Men found they could go on longer with Lady Rose without feeling the exertion than with any other; as for tiring her—a month after she was presented, there was no question of such a thing.

“She’s always going so thoroughly within herself,” Regy Avenel remarked; “that’s about the secret of it.”

His opinion in these matters was worth having; for he was the crack cotillon-leader of that year.

Every man or woman who has a reputation to keep up, however flimsy or trivial, has a certain object and interest in life; and, after all, there seems no reason why there should not be choregraphic as well as athletic champions. The girl became imbued with a kind of artistic enthusiasm; and looked forward to her balls, as a successful actress looks forward to her scenic triumphs. She was too lazy, perhaps too frank, ever thoroughly to flirt; yet she would do

much in an innocent way to win or retain an eligible partner; and was not niggardly of looks, words, or smiles, in rewarding her special favourites. These were found naturally enough in a fast, though not a very vicious, set. They were too young for the most part to be thoroughly depraved: amongst Lady Rose's *attachés*, there was scarce one whose beard was fairly grown.

Nevertheless, certain matrons, and maids whose snoods had lost their gloss, looked askance as she passed by, whispering bitter words; even as Rebecca, on the day after she cheated her firstborn of his birthright, may have wagged her head, and scowled from under her brows, at some laughing daughter of Heth.

Whatever may have been her temptations, the Lady Rose must have kept herself heart-whole, if not quite fancy-free. When she first heard of Lord Nithsdale as a suitor, she showed no signs of repugnance or terror, but said placidly to her mother, that she liked him as well as she liked anyone else; and she was sure he would be kind to her. Speaking on the subject to the most intimate of her male and female friends, she consistently declined to be looked on as a martyr. It was true that she had known the Earl from childhood upwards; for one of his divers estates, on which he had of late resided

frequently, marched with her father's property at Daventry Court.

Perhaps amongst their mutual acquaintance, more pity was felt for the bridegroom than for the bride; though none of these amicable impertinences were expressed aloud. Despite his homely bearing and quiet manner, none, gentle or simple, dreamed of taking liberties with Hugh of Nithsdale; and pity, real or feigned, was utterly uncalled for.

The Earl had no mind to cage or clip the wings of the beautiful bird that had perched so willingly on his shoulder, and knew right well he could trust her not to range too far. Though there was no verbal compact, Lady Rose understood that she was free to follow her own inclinations in any reasonable way; that she was still free to indulge her own tastes, to plan and carry out her own amusements, and to gather her own friends round her, when and where she would. It was a very blithe bridal; and when the honeymoon had waned, the bride did not scruple to confess, to whomsoever it might concern, that she was perfectly—I believe her own words were “awfully”—happy.

In the shape of this same ball, her first matronly anxiety came upon her. The ordinary cares of preparation troubled her not a whit; she left all such things in perfect confidence to her house-

keeper and house-steward, and to the tradesmen, whom she had learned to look upon as trusty Slaves of the Ring. Neither was she nervous; though she would have to play hostess for the first time before a critical audience, and in presence of royalty. She had other causes of disquietude; and these were solemnly discussed one day at luncheon by a council of three, whereat assisted her mother and Reginald Avenel of choragic fame. The chiefest trouble, as may be imagined, was the revision of the invitation-cards.

The Countess had set her delicate foot down on one point—that, come what would, her first ball should not be over-crowded—a just and pleasant resolve, but not so easily carried out in the face of a visiting-list of portentous dimensions, when people congregated from the uttermost parts of the earth for the express purpose of showing themselves—if they had the chance—on that especial night at Nithsdale House. The worst of it was, that friends, who had made their own election sure, declined to be content therewith, and persisted in pleading for others who seemed likely to be left in the outer darkness. Lady Nithsdale was at her wits' end. She had calculated, by the help of some cunning in such matters, how many her rooms would hold comfortably; and she was on the very verge of such a

limit now. Yet still the letters came pouring in, and her carriage could not halt for five minutes in the Mile, without being beset by petitioners. She was too goodnatured to like vexing anybody, and too wise in her simple way to make needless enemies thus early in her career. Even whilst she sat at luncheon two notes were brought in, of which she guessed the import so soon as she glanced at the monograms.

"One can't even eat a poor little plover's egg in peace," the Countess said, pouting. "I declare it's a thousand times worse than Christmas bills!" And she tore open one of the envelopes quite viciously.

Avenel looked at her with a half-smile—a little sad and a little envious. He had been trying for some time now to make a younger son's fortune square with expensive tastes, and had come to the conclusion that there are not many things worse than Christmas bills, when the patience of creditors waxes threadbare.

The first note contained only one of the ordinary petitions; and the Countess threw it carelessly across to her mother, after a glance at its contents, saying,

"Lady Blakeston wants to bring that plain prim niece. Quite impossible, isn't it, mamma?—What can M. de Fonteyrac want?" she went on, as

she opened the other envelope. "All the embassy, except those two who don't dance, have got cards already."

But the second note seemed to touch the Countess more narrowly; and, as she passed it to Avenel, she clasped her hands in comic despair.

Yet there was nothing very alarming on the face of the document, couched in the courtliest of diplomatic styles. Therein M. de Fonteyrac, referring himself to the angelic goodness of Madame la Comtesse, prayed permission to bring with him to her ball his especial friend Gaspard de Sauterel.

Now Lady Nithsdale, as you know, was, in a certain way, imbued with an artistic spirit; and all real artists are more nervous in exhibiting before a single *maestro* than before five hundred *cognoscenti*. Gaspard, Marquis de Sauterel, was an European celebrity. Filling a high post at the Imperial Court, he held another office, quite as well recognised and defined, though betokened by no outward insignia. For the last four seasons he had reigned without a rival over Parisian cotillons. The haughtiest of the female *noblesse* altered the date of their entertainments to insure his presence; and the lightest feet in France were too proud to follow in his wake.

"O Regy, what is to be done?" the Countess asked half pettishly. "Something is sure to go

wrong; and then, can't you fancy his going back to Paris, and talking compassionately about insular ambition?"

Before he answered, Avenel finished slowly a goblet of weak claret-cup. He was very temperate, both in food and drink—training, so to speak, for his work—and from mere condition would have run into a place in any ordinary two-mile handi-cap. Then he read the note through carefully, lifting his brows: he was not a handsome man; but his eyebrows were unexceptionable, and he made play with them accordingly.

"Don't you flurry yourself, Lady Rose" (to the Countess of Nithsdale's intimates her maiden name seemed to come always most naturally); "we're not beat yet, and I don't see why we should be either. De Sauterel isn't running in his old form, so Dolly Forester says, and he ought to know, for there never was more than seven pounds between 'em. Baccarat after balls, and absinthe before breakfast, are beginning to tell. The Marquis is as quick on his legs as ever; but, I hear, he can't stay."

What might have been a dark speech to others was intelligible enough to his hearer. Turf metaphors were scarce likely to offend the ears of Lord Daventry's daughter. Her sweet face cleared somewhat, though doubt still lingered there.

"Besides," Avenel went on placidly, "it's very easy to make things quite safe. Why don't you let De Sauterel lead in his own fashion? He can't find fault then. Don't mind me: I'll abdicate with pleasure. I've always said my life is one long self-sacrifice."

Rose Marston by many of her acquaintances was called capricious and fickle—and not without reason. Her preferences were often wonderfully shortlived, and the first favourite of one night would become the extremest outsider the next. Indeed, sometimes after supper her card became so terribly involved that she was forced, so to speak, to take the benefit of the Act, and start afresh; paying her creditors nothing whatever in the pound. But in her real friendships she was stanch as steel. She had known Reginald Avenel long before she came out, and had always looked upon him as one of the family—their ancestors had been related in some very remote age: it was strange, but perfectly true, that their cousinly familiarity had never ripened into the cousinly flirtation, which is almost *de rigueur*.

"Don't be so utterly absurd, Regy," she said, with a flush on her cheek and a flash in her lazy brown eyes. "Throwing one's old friends over for people one has never seen, isn't the way to bring luck about the house. If you say two words more,

I shall think you want to change me for the Firefly; I always thought her step suited you best."

He held up his hand in deprecation.

"*L'Empire, c'est la Paix*, Lady Rose. So said a greater than De Sauterel. Always remember that, before you begin to quarrel. If your Majesty won't accept our resignation, it's easily withdrawn. We'll pull through somehow, never fear. Only don't fret any more about these things. You're beginning to look quite fagged already."

Lady Daventry was in no sort of way a model of matronhood; but she was foolishly fond of her children, and specially of this, her eldest-born daughter. She was a better listener than talker, and up to this time had taken little part in the family-council: she got up now, and wound her arm around her daughter's neck caressingly.

"Regy is quite right, darling," she said; "you musn't fret, and there's no earthly reason for it. I saw a good deal of M. de Sauterel last year in Paris. There's not a more good-natured little creature alive; and, if he were given to fault-finding, he would scarcely practise it—here." Lady Daventry's smile was full of memorial meaning. "I'll take care that everybody knows to-day that your list is full; so you shall be bored with no more begging-letters. That's settled."

Then the conclave broke up.

Is it likely that, in this hard workaday world, many should be found who could throw themselves seriously into a discussion, frivolous as that set down here? Truly, I know not. The statesman's plans probably were no less deep, the swords of soldiers no less sharp, the quibbles of lawyers no less astute, the song of poets no less musical, the lash of critics no less sharp, in Liliput than in Brobdingnag. Insects, as well as carnivora, are integral parts of creation; and Ephemeris, setting things in order for her bloodless banquet, has cares just as real, though less truculent than those of Megatherium, who shakes the forest-land with his roaring as he seeks his meat from God.

CHAPTER II.

So Lady Nithsdale's ball was a success—*teres atque rotundus*—without a single flaw. The *Dieu de la Danse* was thoroughly propitious, sanctioning everything and everybody with the benignest of smiles; and before daybreak became the merest mortal, in his readiness to lay down his divinity at a mortal's feet. Indeed, when Gaspard de Sauterel returned to his own place, he created great scandal and discontent amongst the faithful beyond the seas by what they were pleased to call his Anglo-mania. It was months before he ceased to rave about Lady Nithsdale's waltzing, which he was wont to characterise as "a poesy."

But no triumph can last for ever, so Lady Nithsdale's ball was over at last. Carriage after carriage drove away with its cloaked and hooded freight; whilst the men for the most part strolled off by twos and threes through the fresh spring morning. But only one brougham we need follow. In it sat two women, both fair to look upon, though neither was in her very first youth, and their beauty, such as it was, differed essentially in style.

The chief thing which you would probably have remarked was, how wonderfully both faces stood that trying after-dawn light, under which few damsels, even in their first season, willingly linger. It only seemed to soften becomingly the exceeding brilliancy of Laura Brancepeth's colouring: and it did not bring out a line or deepen a shadow on Blanche Ellerslie's cheeks—soft, smooth, and white as the leaves of a tropical lily.

On neither countenance was there trace of weariness; and they were not too sleepy, it seemed, for a little quiet talk, opened by Lady Laura Brancepeth—better known in her own set as “La Reine Gailarde.”

“Thoroughly well done, wasn't it, Blanche? The rooms just full enough to look their best, and not a particle of heat or crowd. Anne Daventry has a specialty for these things, when she will only give herself the trouble. Those leaf-screens round the fountains in the conservatory were the prettiest things I ever saw; and you admired them even more than I apparently, for you spent about half the night there. By the bye, that reminds me—I should just like to know where you were all the cotillon? I missed you after the first figure?”

“I was tired,” Mrs. Ellerslie answered. “I should certainly have got one of my headaches if I

had gone on: you know what my headaches are? The fact is, I am going down fast into the vale of years; after this season, I don't mean to waltz any more."

Few and faint were the signs of age on the delicate face just then; and so Laura Brancepeth thought, as she gazed at her companion, with a mischievous flash in her broad black eyes.

"Yes: I know what your headaches are, and how they come and go, and how easily tired you are sometimes. As for that excuse about your age, I consider it positively rude. I'm two year older than you are, but I've no idea of wall-flowering just yet. You wicked little *comédienne*! I never saw you act better than you did to-night; you know very well you only slipped away, to take another long lesson in botany from Mark Ramsay. Why, Blanche—is it possible? I can't believe it: you're actually blushing!"

If an aurora borealis had blazed forth suddenly in the clear gray sky above them, Lady Laura could not have spoken with more astonishment. She was, in truth, looking on a natural phenomenon. The practised coquette was no more likely to betray signs of discomfiture at the mention of any ordinary name than a charger is likely to start at a pistol-shot. Yet there was no mistake about the tell-tale

flush—rather deepening than fading under the other's searching gaze.

"O Blanche! Was it not acting then, after all?"—Lady Laura went on, in quite a changed tone; and the mockery died out of her eyes. "You can't mean that you have been in earnest to-night. The worst of your flirtations would be better than such fearful folly."

Mrs. Ellerslie's look of injured innocence was scarcely so successful as usual.

"You're too tyrannical, Queenie," she said plaintively; "there's no possibility of contenting you. Well, allowing that you are right in your suspicion—which I don't—is it not better to be foolish once in a way, than wicked always?"

But the other was not to be put off with a jest.

"I am quite serious," she said. "You and I are very old friends, fast friends too; though you'd provoke a saint sometimes, and I own I'm rather apt to bully you. Though I often tease you about men, I never really pity them much. But I should pity you awfully if you came to grief; and I'd sooner hear of your breaking half-a-dozen honest hearts, than giving the least bit of yours to Mark Ramsay."

"What fresh story have you heard against him?"

The low voice was quite steady; but the down trimming fluttered, though there was no breeze to stir it.

"Are not the old ones enough?" the other answered gravely. "If I had never heard a single word against him, I should take warning from his face—wonderfully handsome, I allow, and gentle too, when he chooses to let it soften. But when it is in repose, I think it the cruellest face I ever looked upon. It would be rather nice to be lorded over by some people I know; but I don't like to think of any woman as that man's slave. And slave she would be: depend upon it, there would be no half-measures there."

Blanche laughed, quite naturally now.

"What a vampire you have made of poor Mr. Ramsay! If you knew him better, perhaps you wouldn't think him so fatal in any way. It's rather refreshing to talk to him, after the platitudes one has to listen to as a rule; though he neither talks politics nor scandal, and doesn't seem to consider flirting a matter of absolute duty. But—so far—Queenie, he has done *me* no harm."

Neither capitals nor italics, nor any other device of type, could do justice to Blanche Ellerslie's "me." Du, issuing from the tenderest lips that have murmured love-whispers in Rhine-land, never sounded

half so cosy and caressing. Very few men heard it for the first time, without feeling a new sympathy awaking within them, and a kind of prescience that some confidence was coming.

Lady Laura's wiry night-slaves scuffled over the ground quicker than the best pair of steppers in town; and they were so nearly at home now, that she had only time to say:

"I'm too sleepy to go on preaching; only, Blanche, do pray take care."

So the two women embraced, and parted for the night.

With a sinful indifference to beauty-sleep, Mrs. Ellerslie sat musing long after her maid had left her. Self-examination was not much in her line; but in the solitude of her own chamber she did not affirm to herself quite so confidently as she had done to Laura Brancepeth, that "no harm has been done to me."

CHAPTER III.

Now what manner of man was he, whose name had made Blanche Ellerslie flush and flutter like a girl, and the reckless Reine Gaillarde earnest in warning?

Not a wonder in any way. Yet one who would certainly have achieved some notable success in life, if he had turned to any account his gifts and chances.

Mark Ramsay came of an ancient Scots house, that had once been very powerful in the Lowlands, but whose fortunes had ebbed steadily for centuries, and rapidly at last, till the present generation was well-nigh stranded. Instead of having a voice in the councils of the realm, Ramsay of Kilmain could scarce get a hearing at petty sessions; out of demesnes vast and fertile, there were left now only a few hundred acres of poor hungry land round a hideous red-brick barrack, tacked on to a gaunt gray peel-tower; and of all the wealth amassed by wrong and rapine, there was not enough left to keep a creditable balance at the county bank.

The family met with singularly little sympathy

in their downward career. From time immemorial these Ramsays had been hard, despotic tyrants, apt to oppress the poor and needy, whether vassals or neighbours, and only lavish of their gold when it was a question of selfish vice. The present Laird of Kilmain, Mark's father, was quite as unpopular as any of his ancestors, though he had been guilty of none of the excesses for which they had been evilly renowned; being, indeed, exceeding miserly in his habits, and in religion a gloomy fanatic. Though he looked so keenly and carefully after the pence, the pounds, somehow, took to themselves wings, and flitted one by one out of his covetous fingers. He had an unhappy turn for small speculations, and each of these seemed fated to prove more or less unprofitable; so that, after pinching and saving for a score of years, he found himself rather poorer than when he came into his heritage. Ill-luck may have done much to embitter a temper naturally morose and sullen; but certainly amongst all his forbears there was not found a more thorough tyrant, though his tyranny, perforce, was on a petty scale. A hard master, a merciless landlord, an austere father, and a brutal husband—though of actual violence he was never guilty—he seldom lost a chance of vexing any living thing that could safely be oppressed.

Two children were the issue of a most unhappy marriage; and Marcia Ramsay went to her rest—gladly enough, no doubt—within a month after Mark's birth.

The heir of Kilmain, both outwardly and inwardly, very much resembled his father: perhaps for this reason the two got on well enough together in a sort of way. From his boyhood upwards, Gilbert Ramsay had always yielded to dictation, however unreasonable, a stolid acquiescence with which it was next to impossible to quarrel; and when he grew up to manhood, from mere force of habit he continued docile; with occasional fits of the sullen, that never opened into ripe revolt. All this the elder man accepted ungraciously, as his mere due; yet it is certain that he liked his first-born better than he liked any other creature.

With Mark it was very different. To say that there was no love lost betwixt the two does not at all express it. There was positive antipathy: Kilmain hated his second son almost from his birth. He hated him for the haughty beauty that always reminded him of the woman whose spirit he never could cow though he broke her heart, and who died long before she was tamed. Mark's mouth and eyes were the counterparts of his mother's; and James Ramsay's violence of word or deed was soon met

over again by the same disdainful smile and glance of quiet defiance that had often galled him in the old days. He would never own it to himself, but it was quite true that he never felt thoroughly easy in the boy's presence. He hated him for this; he hated him worst of all because, before Mark was ten years old, he was made virtually independent of his father.

When Duncan Cameron came back with a fair fortune from the East, where all his youth and manhood were passed, almost his first visit was to his favourite sister's grave. He had heard enough of the manner of her life and death to keep him from ever setting foot under her husband's roof; and when he made his will in favour of her child, he took special care that not a doit should be handled by the Laird of Kilmain, much less pass into his clutches.

The guardians of the child were well chosen—two shrewd, sturdy, sensible business men; ready to do their duty without fear or favour, and as little likely to be bullied as beguiled. If Duncan Cameron had designed to work out a posthumous revenge on him who had made his sister's life miserable, he could scarcely have devised a more ingenious plan. From the day that he heard the will read, to that on which Mark attained his majority, James Ramsay

lived in perpetual fret and discontent. The property was not so very large—a little over a thousand a-year, all told; but the sum allowed yearly for the boy's nurture and education would more than have discharged all the household expenses at Kilmain. Of this, beyond a meagre allowance for actual maintenance whilst Mark lived at home, the father could touch no part; for education the guardians provided as it seemed to them good.

When it was decided to send Mark to Eton, Ramsay did make some show of resistance, and threw every possible impediment in the way; but there loomed in the distance the terrors of the High Court of Chancery; and, though he had never read Sophocles, he knew well enough what usually befalls those who

Hurl themselves violently against the footstool of Justice.

So he was bound to swallow the bitter pill, and wreak his ill-humour on such as were compelled to endure it.

Mark's school-days passed very pleasantly. He was a great favourite with his masters and his mates. He did not show much energy, either at work or play, but got through a sufficient amount of both creditably enough. The vacations spent at Kilmain were terribly dreary. James Ram-

say never lifted his hand against his son—perhaps he feared whither one act of violence might lead him—but he did not seek to dissemble his dislike. Though the boy was wonderfully intrepid by nature, and had unhappily grown quite careless of such things as domestic affections, he could scarcely help starting sometimes as, looking up suddenly, he met those hard haggard eyes. His brother was no sort of companion for him, for they had not a single taste in common; so it was no marvel if Black Monday was a day to be scored with the whitest of chalk in Mark's calendar.

When he went to Oxford he became practically his own master; and his first act of independence was a refusal to spend any part of his first vacation at Kilmain. From that day forth, he slept no more under his father's roof-tree; and no communication by word of mouth passed betwixt the two.

Thus no foundling was ever more absolutely free of all home-ties than Mark Ramsay. How fraught with danger is such isolation, all men know—many to their cost. Some hearts there are of such rare material that, under such proving, they grow strong and self-reliant, but never hard. Mark's was none of these. His selfishness, such as it was, lay not on the surface, but deep in grain. He did

not object to benevolence on principle, and would do a good-natured action readily enough, if it led him not too far out of his way; but would help a mere acquaintance just as readily as an ancient comrade, expecting no gratitude in return. If he had confessed his real sentiments, he would probably have told you that friendship was a thing as much out of date as brotherhood-in-arms. He was liberal and hospitable to the outside limit of his means—that his worst enemies allowed—but was neither reckless nor prodigal. He was fond of playing his part in the battle of life; and had no mind to be invalided, for lack of the sinews of war.

So he never got into any serious money-scraps on his own account. As for involving himself for another,—the man was yet to be found confident enough in his own persuasive powers to ask Mark Ramsay for the use of his name. Nevertheless, he was quite as popular at Oxford as he had been at Eton: not a general favourite, simply because he did not care to mix much in general society; but the men of his set swore by him. His personal advantages may have had much to do with this. You may sermonise till you are weary about these things being but skin-deep, and the rest of it; but you never will prevent them being a passport to the favour of men, to say nothing of womenkind. The

credentials may be false, or forged, of course: till their falsity is proved, they stand.

Mark's beauty was of a very rare type—slightly effeminate, perhaps, but none the less attractive for that. An old Venetian painter would have revelled in the rich soft colouring of his hair, eyes, and lips, each the darkest of their several shades of chestnut, blue, and crimson; and all harmonising, instead of contrasting, with cheeks of clear pale olive. His frame was well knit and put together, though on rather a slender scale. And it was a good lasting figure; for at five-and-thirty neither gauntness nor coarseness marred its outline. His manner, too, was very winning: more perhaps at first than after long acquaintance; for sometimes its exceeding quietude almost irritated you. But of his voice, with its subtle variations of semi-tones, you never grew weary. Anyone thus endowed, unless exceptionally weak in intellect, or strong in principle, or furnished with a special safeguard, is scarce likely to reach manhood without working some great harm to himself, if not to others. The safeguard I mean, is the having won the love of a true, beautiful woman; and the being able to hold fast that most precious pearl—never hankering after other men's jewels.

Now Mark Ramsay was neither very simple nor

very seraphic. Of boyish romance he never was guilty; indeed, before he left Eton he could theorise with dangerous glibness on certain subjects, and was an advanced Fourierist in matters feminine. Guilty passion or lawless caprice, when they have once fairly laid hold on a man, will leave their traces behind, however thoroughly they may seem to be shaken off, like any other malaria. Years after the patient has been pronounced perfectly whole, there will come back, without rhyme or reason, the hot thrills and the cold shivers. Nevertheless, there are degrees in maladies, and Mark Ramsay had curiously ill-luck in his first fever-fit.

Frederic, Graf von Adlersberg, was a very famous diplomatist. The truces he obtained, and the treaties he cemented, when war, or discord at the least, seemed inevitable are written down in history. Ermengild, his wife, was almost better known for the domestic contracts she had severed, and the family revolutions she had caused. There was scarcely a capital boasting an embassy on which she had not made her mark. In six European tongues at least anathemas or complaints might have been heard at the mention of her name; and matrons, mothers, and maids would have joined in the chorus. She had served her Master more earnestly and successfully than ever her husband

served his earthly sovereign: but she never wrought a more thorough piece of the Devil's work than when she "formed" Mark Ramsay.

There are crimes that no lawgiver, from him of Horeb downwards, has ever set down in his calendar; crimes concerning which the acutest legalist could never draw an indictment. Yet to expiate lesser offences, men—ay, and women to boot—have come forth through a low door into the cold gray morning, and stood under a black beam waiting for their shameful death, whilst ten thousand of their fellow-creatures looked on unpityingly. Many who are guilty of such deeds sit in the foremost places of our synagogues, and the foremost rooms at our feasts, bearing themselves debonnairely or austere after their fashion; either smiling with calm superiority at their neighbour's misdeeds and failings, or casting, with unerring aim, sharp stones at whoso shall have broken the least commandment in the Decalogue. Yet, I think, for these things there will come a reckoning, when the penalty shall be paid to the uttermost pang.

The Countess von Adlersberg was none of these smooth-faced hypocrites. She sinned with a high hand, and would no more have dreamt of draping herself in social virtue than of going to a masquerade as a wimpled nun. More than once blood

had been shed, when she might have averted the calamity by a word or a sign: but she sat still, whilst it went on to the bitter end, with no more ruth than Faustina may have felt, at the Circus, when she gave the death-sign with her little white thumb.

Yet Ermengild was never more thoroughly a murderess in intent than when she dropped poison at the root of every frank, fresh, and generous impulse in Mark Ramsay's heart, watching them wither day by day, till only a dry waste was left on which flowers could never grow again.

It was at Baden those two met, in the summer of Mark's second year at Oxford. Myriads of handsome faces had passed under the review of the Countess's critical eyes; but never one quite like Ramsay's. Almost at the first glance she determined on his conquest, very much as some wealthy bey may determine on the purchase of some new importation into the slave-market, and with no more doubt as to the result. There was no sort of difficulty in bringing him within her reach; for Count von Adlersberg then, and for some time after, was engaged in London on important diplomatic business, and Ermengild had a large English acquaintance. How quickly, rapidly, and completely Mark was subjugated need not be told; all the more rapidly, perhaps, for those theories aforesaid which had

given him a hollow sense of security, and made him a sort of oracle amongst his fellows. Everyone knows the trite old proverb about "a little learning." It is never more true than when applied to a moral or physical duel: the straightforward simplicity of utter ignorance has puzzled science ere now; but it is next to a miracle if one who flatters himself he has some cunning in fence escapes without a dangerous wound. All through that autumn and winter and the ensuing spring Mark Ramsay abode under the spell. The sorceress marvelled sometimes at her own constancy in caprice; but this one, though it endured longer than most others, came at last to a rather abrupt close. Then—with little preamble or excuse—she cast open the gates of her prison-house, and told her thrall that he was free.

Such a freedom as it was! Freedom from faith; freedom from such old-world prejudices as reverence for woman's truth, or respect for her honour; freedom from all natural compunctions that cause a man to ponder for a while, if not to hold his hand, when on the point of working wrong, which may never be amended, on innocents or weaklings; freedom from ruth or remorse. And—in place of these things—only a vague desire to requite on the many the harm wrought by the one, and a dogged determination to make his own pleasure the Lesbian rule of his life thenceforward.

In such a frame of mind Mark Ramsay went on his way through the world when he was not twenty-one; and a terrible parody of a noble maxim was his motto even to the end:

*Fais ce que voudras,
Advienne que pourra.*

It would be unfair to impute all this to the influence—fatal as it undoubtedly was—which overshadowed him so early. Mark was born with a sufficient portion of the stubborn hardness which, for centuries past, if Fame spoke true, had run in the Ramsay blood. This had been fostered, doubtless, by his home-training, wherein natural affection was replaced by antagonism. If the Countess Ermengild had never crossed his path, it is not likely he would ever have turned out gentle or good, or even wise in his generation. Many there are—fortunately for the well-being of this world of ours—who, had their first illusion been destroyed yet more rudely, would have remembered that there was much work left for them to do, and many prizes of all sorts worth the winning; and have braced themselves to the honest, healthy pursuit of these, instead of falling back long before their prime on the cynicism which ought to be the last resource of disappointed old age. But Mark Ramsay—having said in his first haste, “all women are liars”—acted on the aphorism in bitter earnest.

For many years he led an odd wandering sort of life; spending much more of his time abroad than in England, and having nowhere a fixed abiding-place. He cultivated art in a desultory fashion, and his pursuits were rather of a quiet than an athletic order; though he was famous both with pistol and rifle, and had done some notable work with the big game in divers countries. The only restless element in all his nature was evinced in fondness for travelling. There were few nooks and corners of the civilised world that were strange to him; and fewer still, where he had tarried beyond a brief season, whence some tale might not have been gathered redounding little to his credit. Wherever he went he made the same pitiless, unscrupulous use of his fair face and lissom tongue. With women, unfortunately, forewarned is not forearmed; and thus far his evil reputation seemed never to have seriously hindered the accomplishment of his desires. He was not a whit more reckless of the consequences to others than of the consequences to himself; but he had come out of the most serious scrapes scatheless—not always unscathing—with the strange impunity that seems to attach only to those who will play for their lives as readily as for any other stake.

Ramsay never paraded his conquests or boasted of them in after-days. He would speak lightly

enough of womankind, but never disparagingly of any single woman. Indeed, he would show a distaste for such converse plainly enough at times; few who sought to betray him into confession or confidence tried the experiment twice. This spark of chivalry, and a certain generosity at play—he was a bold and successful gambler—were the two bright spots relieving the darkness of Mark Ramsay's nature at thirty-five.

With all this, his evil reputation spread itself far and wide; the more so, perhaps, because there never had been imputed to him a single venial or vulgar intrigue. He confined his depredations exclusively to his own class; somewhat on the principle of those masterful thieves of ancient days, who, plundering priest, noble, and franklin without mercy, let peasant and pauper go scot-free. The *demi-monde* of foreign capitals knew him only by name; or, at the most, by meeting him occasionally at entertainments where their presence was only an accessory to high play; and not one of the soiled doves, who flutter from tree to tree in the forest of St. John, or build their nests in Brompton groves, had ever succeeded in perching, were it for an instant, on his shoulder.

Ermengild von Adlersberg had fallen back on feminine diplomacy when the cunning of cosmetics could no longer dissemble the retribution of Time

the Avenger: half the domestic plots that amused or scandalised Paris were hatched in her boudoir. Though those two met but seldom of late years, no *caneans* interested her so much as those concerning Mark Ramsay. She seemed, whilst she listened, to glow with a quiet satisfaction, and a kind of reflected triumph; like a venerable college tutor hearing of parliamentary successes achieved by some favourite pupil.

Two years before the opening of this tale, Mark's position had been entirely changed by a singular freak of fortune. During a winter spent in Paris, community of tastes, and, to a certain extent, of pursuits, brought him much into the company of a certain Sir Robert Kenlis. There was some sort of cousinship betwixt the two; but so entirely remote, that even a Scotch genealogist would have been puzzled fairly to unite the pedigrees. Such as it was, it was enough to warrant the old baronet in gratifying a fancy and a dislike. The fancy was for his new acquaintance; the dislike was for each and everyone of the relatives he had ever known. So one day, about a week after Sir Robert Kenlis' sudden death, there was intense heartburning in the large circle of expectants, and some wonderment in the world at large, at the announcement that Mark Ramsay had been left the sole heir.

It was a very goodly heritage; comprising some

80000*l.* a-year in improvable estates, and money enough in the Funds to buy another fair property; to say nothing of jewels and pictures, statues and furniture, stored away in half the capitals of Europe, enough to stock a vaster mansion than Kenlis Castle.

Ramsay was in nowise outwardly exalted by his great good luck, and seemed not in the least aware that from a comparative cipher in the world he had become an important unit, in whose well or ill faring the matronly part at least of polite society took an interest sudden and sincere. Most of his time was now necessarily spent in England; otherwise there was little change in his habits, except that he indulged his taste in horseflesh to the uttermost, and entertained in London oftener and on a larger scale than had been his wont. Beyond a bachelor-party in the grouse-season, he had made no attempt to keep house at Kenlis Castle.

Such was Mark Ramsay at the opening of this our tale. Thus early in it I take leave to observe, that he differs as widely from my private and personal idea of a hero, even of melodrama, as two created or imagined things can differ. He is simply the chief actor in a company more or less indifferent; and such as he will, unluckily, often thrust themselves into these *rôles*, whether it like the manager or not.

CHAPTER IV.

"WHERE are you off to, Ramsay? You'll come and have a quiet smoke, and take a modest drink, somewhere, surely? Platt's will be full in about ten minutes; and the big rubber at the Partington is in full swing just now; and—and there's lots of things to do before heading homewards."

The speaker was a big, brawny man, with an aureole of light-red hair round a hale, weather-beaten face, that would have looked more at home on a purple moorland, or at the down-wind side of a gorse-cover, or under the steep bank of a salmon-river, or on the slippery deck of a cutter going free, than amongst the delicate ferns and rare exotics lining the vestibule of Nithsdale House. Indeed, it was a miracle how Dick Calverly always contrived to look so fresh; considering that he was ready for "a quiet smoke and a modest drink" at any hour in the twenty-four, and had a perfect antipathy to taking his nightly rest at regular hours if he could find the most shadowy excuse for keeping vigil.

"That's the pull of Norway," he was wont to say. "You never need go to bed at all there, unless you like. Somebody's up all night long."

I believe his only objection to the English climate was that it could boast no midnight sun. People said he burned the candle at both ends; if so, it was a very tough taper, and seemed likely to outlast many that were consumed by miser's rule. He rather prided himself on his powers of seducing men into sitting up to unearthly hours; but on this occasion his simple eloquence failed. Ramsay shook his head as they went down the steps together.

"Your ideas of a quiet smoke are rather different from mine, Dick. If I had lungs like forge-bellows, or like yours, perhaps I shouldn't mind doing it in atmosphere that you might cut with a hand-saw; but I haven't, you see, more's the pity; and my drinks already have reached the outside verge of modesty. We have done quite enough for our country to-night, I think; why shouldn't we try what a little sleep will do for our noble selves?"

Calverly laughed a jolly laugh in his huge ruddy beard.

"You're a pretty specimen of a patriot, Mark, you are! Gad! I shouldn't mind taking my turn at some of the duty-work you went through to-night. You didn't fag over it, it struck me. I don't wonder you're in such a hurry to get to bed: I suppose you're pretty safe to dream of the White Widow."

"I never dream," said the other, as they parted.

A short walk brought Ramsay home. He occupied the first floor of one of those pleasant houses which are to be found in certain quiet nooks of Mayfair, that, lying close to the stream of traffic, are never troubled by its rattle. The rooms were very large and lofty, and the rich furniture, though luxuriant to a degree, was subdued in tone. They had been bachelor's chambers since the days of the Millamants and Wildairs; and no tenant had yet been tempted to mar the effect of the carved cornices and panels by any new-fangled devices of modern upholstery.

"I never dream."

It was a bitter truth. Neither waking nor sleeping did idle visions trouble Mark Ramsay. The deep-blue eyes, that seemed made for dreaming, rarely looked far into futurity—more rarely still, into the past—but always straight and keenly at the goal set before them; never slackening in their gaze, or turning aside, till the race was fairly lost or won.

Despite the virtuous resolves he had expressed so lately, Ramsay seemed in no great haste to betake himself to rest, but sat down by his fire,—still burning, for the spring mornings were chill,—and began to build up the coals, in the slow mechanical fashion of one whose thoughts are busy

elsewhere. At length he rose, frowning a little, and muttered half-aloud these two words:

“I will.”

Now, when Mark Ramsay said “I will,” whether with a smile or a frown on his face, it meant a good deal. This is what it meant now.

Utterly vicious, cruel, and false—for he was not more pitiless in pursuit than in abandonment—he was not one of those tinselled Lovelaces who, on the strength of some few conquests, more or less easily achieved, are always dinning into your ears their noisy pæan:

She is a woman, therefore to be won.

Mark was too good an engineer to conclude, simply because he had assisted at several victories by siege, sap, or storm, that no fortress was impregnable. Nay more—he had learnt to estimate very justly the precise strength, natural or artificial, of the place beleaguered. He had not known Blanche Ellerslie—intimately at least—very long; but he had known her long enough to be assured that there was but one way to win her. The austere devotee in all Belgravia was not less likely to be beguiled into criminal folly than the dainty little coquette, who only rebuked audacity with a deprecating smile.

Now Mark Ramsay—not only from the manner of his life, but from the bent of his inclination—had

hitherto been exceedingly averse to wedlock. It had never entered into his head to divide the competence which barely sufficed his own needs with a woman no richer than himself. Liking luxury well, he liked liberty better, and preferred a dinner of potherbs to such banquets as purseproud heiresses purvey. That he was not often called upon to exercise self-denial, you may well imagine. The fish must be hungry indeed that will rise at such baits as an evil reputation and a shallow purse; and more than one of the women who had sacrificed duty and honour and happiness for Mark Ramsay would have shrunk from finding him a wife amongst their own kith and kin.

The case was widely different now. Even Arline probably slept infinitely sounder, after the first strangeness of novelty was passed, under the fretted roof of Arnheim than ever she did under gipsy tent or cold twinkling stars; and Mark was never a thorough Bohemian. He was quite ready to admit that wealth, no less than nobility, obliges; and was disposed to act up to his new duties, at least in outward seeming. Knowing that a *châtelaine* was sorely needed at Kenlis Castle, he had resolved within himself that the void should ere long be filled. But this was not to be hastily or rashly done.

Despite his antecedents, of choice there was now

no lack. Matrons, however extreme to mark what is done amiss by paupers or detrimentals, are not prone to disbelieve in the penitence of Dives; and the sternest guardian of our sheep-cotes will open the wicket readily enough to the wandering wether that carries fleece of gold. Also there are damsels always to be found, courageous and charitable enough to devote themselves so thoroughly to the good work of guiding the reclaimed sinner aright, as to be willing to walk on with him thenceforward through life hand-in-hand.

Over the ranks of the maiden battalion Mark Ramsay's eyes roved, admiringly perhaps, never longingly. He was not troubled either with scruples or remorse; but he would no more have thought of asking a young innocent girl to cast in her lot with him for better and for worse, than he would have sat down to play piquet with a boy who could not count the points of the game. Neither did the taming of a *lioncelle* tempt him a whit. He had seen such ventures turn out happily enough; indeed, there was fair promise of a like event in the very house from which he had just come; but he did not believe for an instant that such cases were parallel with his own. Insurance-tables are not infallible; neither are years always to be reckoned by their mere number. Men like Hugh of Nithsdale, who

have led from youth upwards an honest, healthy life, taking duty and pleasure in their fair turn, have in them the moral, if not physical, vitality—very often both—of a dozen Mark Ramsays.

Though he was wonderfully self-reliant and confident in his own resources, there was little trivial vanity about this man. He had held his own—only too successfully thus far—against all comers; but he knew this could not last for ever. Another victory or two, perhaps, and then he would be fain to stand aside amongst the veterans, and watch the feats of younger champions, with the mild satisfaction of criticism or comparison; for “Age will be served.” Years and years ago he had seen in Paris a sparkling little comedy, wherein a choice specimen of the *ancien régime* was made to enter the lists with divers aspirants to his young wife’s favour, and vanquish each and everyone with tact, tongue, or sword. He remembered thinking at the time how much pains and ingenuity had been spent for small purpose—how unlikely it was that the gallant old Marquis would repeat his triumph—how impossible, he could repeat it for ever. Having but faint regard for most laws, human or divine, he believed implicitly in the *lex talionis*. He guessed with what malicious scrutiny his domestic life would be watched; and how little sympathy the assailant of others’

peace was likely to meet with if his own were imperilled; what exultation, covert if not expressed, would be felt in certain quarters if it came fairly to wreck. It was odd enough, yet true, that he had never, in all his life, experienced one real pang of jealousy. What if this infirmity were to come, in the train of others, with advancing years? He had seen the faces of better and wiser men wax haggard and drawn under the slow torment; and he had no mind to see such a reflection in his own mirror. It was many years since he had read the *Betrothed*; but, if he had forgotten all other points of the tale, he had not forgotten the substance of stout Wilkin Flammox's speech to the Constable.

"Think her shut up in yonder solitary castle, under such respectable protection, and reflect how long the place will be solitary in this land of love and adventure! We shall have minstrels singing ballads by the score under our windows, and such twangling of harps as would be enough to frighten our walls from their foundations, as clerks say happened to those of Jericho."

Mark Ramsay shivered within himself at the bare idea of such a charge as the captaincy of La Garde Doloreuse.

No. The helpmeet for him was a woman who could sweep graciously and gracefully along the

world's highway, not with prim precaution, yet keeping her dainty feet clear of mire and pitfalls; with a face still so fair that his own eyes might look on it long without wearying; with a charm of manner that would keep her attractive even if the face should fade; with tastes sufficiently in unison with his own to promise pleasant companionship in default of perfect sympathy betwixt them; a woman, in fine, who could take her place worthily amongst the beauties of many generations whose portraits lined the walls of Kenlis Castle.

Such an one Mark thought he had found quite lately.

He had long been familiar with Blanche Ellerslie's name. When they first met he felt only a languid curiosity, and desire to prove for himself whether fame had exaggerated the danger of her society. But before the first hour was over he became sensible, with rather pleasant surprise, that he was becoming subject to the fascination that had enthralled so many, and recognised that there were fresh sensations still for his jaded palate. As they were thrown together her influence grew on him more and more. He no longer watched her coquetries levelled at others with the calm amusement of a mere spectator. Once or twice, when he found himself forestalled in attracting attention, he had stood

aside, smiling a little disdainfully, yet conscious all the while of a sharp sullen pang that he could not account for. You see, up to this time, Mark had never been quite certain that he had a heart, in the common acceptation of the term; and so could not be expected to be well up in the symptoms of cardiac disease. At last he was fain to confess to himself that he was as firmly and fiercely bent on the winning of Blanche Ellerslie as he had ever been on winning any woman, living or dead. He had given up, almost from the first, any idea of attaining this end in any way save one—the making her his wife.

And now you know what those two words meant, that hovered on Ramsay's lips as he betook himself to his rest.

CHAPTER V.

BOTH in high and low places of this world, there are found scores of homely humdrum persons, who, plodding on through life in their own placid way, are always equal to any emergency whatsoever, and come out of such ordeals infinitely better than their flashy fellows.

Hugh Earl of Nithsdale was one of those. He was thoroughly bucolic in his tastes; never so happy as when jogging about on his quiet old cob, chatting with his tenants, or planning improvements with his steward and wood-reeve. He held Cowper to be the very chief of English poets, simply for having penned the words

God made the country, but man made the town.

That hackneyed line seemed to him the embodiment of one of the noblest truths that have ever been promulgated in prose or verse. He never breathed quite freely in an atmosphere laden with smoke, and pent-in betwixt brick and mortar; and felt far wearier, after a lounge over pavement or trim gravel, than after a trudge through the stiffest clay in the Midland shires. I believe, if the truth

were known, he kept a private calendar in school-boy fashion, and marked off the days of the London season; congratulating himself, as he lay down each night, that his holidays were so much nearer. In general society he was not only silent and reserved, but shy to boot; and would flee from the face of morning visitors, to hide himself in the recesses of his library, till the tyranny was overpast.

Nevertheless, when the saloons of Nithsdale House were full, the master of the mansion seemed thoroughly at home and at his ease—essentially the right man in the right place. No critic could have found a flaw in the gentle, grave courtesy with which he received his guests, and cared for their comfort. Having to welcome, for the first time in his life, certain august Personages, he went through the ceremony, not with the tremor of one on whom unmerited or unexpected honour is conferred, but like a man whose ancestors from immemorial time have been deemed worthy of a place at the right-hand of royalty, whether in feast or fray.

Not a few there present noticed this, and spoke of it afterwards with a little wonder. The Countess Rose was not so busy but that she found leisure to mark how her husband bore himself, and to feel proud of him withal. When she had said “good-night” for the last time, she was too utterly weary

to talk even to him, and crept off to her pillow, whereon, till long after the sun was high, she slept the deep dreamless sleep that comes after toilsome triumph. But her first waking thought was a regret that she had not thanked her dear kind Hugh for playing his part so well.

Nothing short of illness, or a social revolution, would have broken the even current of the Earl's methodical ways. Late as it was when he lay down to rest, he rose at his usual hour, and was hard at work in his library—for business letters were unusually numerous that morning—when a message came that the Countess meant to lunch in her boudoir, and begged that he would join her.

Only once before, since their marriage, had the Earl been so favoured. It was when Rose was kept for a day in her rooms from the effects of a chill. He felt as pleased as a boy who has been asked to an impromptu picnic, and at the appointed hour he mounted the stair with an eager haste, curiously contrasting with his usually sober gait. Yet he stood still for an instant in the doorway. Truly it was a picture worth pausing over that he saw.

The Countess was lying, almost at full length, on a low broad sofa. The Mazarin blue of the huge pillows in which her slight figure was half-buried brought out in relief the soft tints of her face and hair; though her face was paler than

hesitatingly;—"don't be alarmed, it was a very trifling thing. Your invitation-list was perfect, with one exception—I do wish you hadn't asked Mr. Kendall."

Lady Nithsdale raised her long eyelashes in languid surprise.

"Now you do puzzle me. Why on earth should you object to poor Horace Kendall? I fancied you didn't even know him by sight. I hardly know him myself; but I should have mortally offended Lady Longfield if I had refused him a card. From what I have seen of him I should think him the most inoffensive creature alive, though he is so clever in his own way."

The Earl bent his shaggy brows till they met.

"There's no more harm in Lady Longfield than in most other empty-headed women, I daresay; but she's too fond of patronage to be very careful where she bestows it. It's quite as well she has no daughters of her own to look after. I never saw Mr. Kendall, to my knowledge, till yesterday; but I have heard quite enough. It's the fashion to cultivate him now, of course. That don't make him in my mind a bit more fitting friend for your sister. And I don't believe, Rose, you'd consider him so perfectly inoffensive if you had watched, as I did, how completely he engrossed Nina last night."

Now the Earl—though about the last man living

to wish to level or lower the standard of his order —was singularly unapt to stand upon its privileges. He would talk just as frankly and genially with one of his own farmers as with the inheritor of forty quarterings; and even the Radical solicitor who opposed him at elections, and strove in all ways to undermine his county influence, never hinted that Lord Nithsdale had a purpose in being, as he expressed it, "so infernally affable." Very seldom in all his life had he been heard to speak hardly or harshly to any fellow-creature. Indeed, he had sometimes scandalised his brother magistrates at Quarter Sessions by his ingenuity in finding excuses for criminals. No one knew this better than his wife; and she felt he must have good reason for so speaking, though she answered laughingly—

"Nina! You don't mean that puss got into mischief at her first ball? She ought to have been sent supperless to bed, at least. No, I noticed nothing; but I wonder mamma didn't, though she is so dreadfully shortsighted. She was too busy helping me, I suppose. The child shall have a good scolding when she comes to tea."

Flirtations were things so entirely out of Lord Nithsdale's line, that it may be worth while to explain his reasons for interference.

CHAPTER VI.

A QUARTER of a century ago few people, living beyond its immediate neighbourhood, were aware of the existence of such a place as Swetenham. Lying somewhat out of the great highway to the West, it was scarcely possible to conceive any traveller being attracted there on business, and the country around was not sufficiently picturesque to tempt artistic explorers. Everything is changed now. Almost the sole relic of the quiet little hamlet is the gray old church-tower, that seems strangely misplaced amongst the red-brick street-rows radiating from the station on a well-travelled branch-line.

The great men of those parts for many generations had been the Vernons of Vernon Mallory. The then-time representative of that family was a very unpopular character; and deservedly so; for his manners and morals rather beseemed a Hungarian magnate than a decent English squire. Arrogant amongst his equals, he ground down dependents and inferiors to a dead-level of servility; hunted poachers like wild beasts,—with hound, if not with horn; and in more ways than one evinced ideas of

feudal privileges, utterly out of date in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Several children had been borne to him by a wife, endowed with a temper almost as haughty as his own, who was not inclined to condone his numberless infidelities. Horace Vernon was a profligate of the worst possible form; his victims were chosen usually from the class whose wrongs, by virtue of his station, he was bound to redress; and he was utterly unscrupulous as to the means of working out his will. His love, or the brutal passion that he dignified by the name, was more harmful than his anger; and it was better to see his cruel eyes set like black flint-stones, than melting into treacherous softness. Educational boards, and middle-class examinations, had not come into existence then; and Radicalism had not spread far beyond the outskirts of towns: peasants and small yeomen, in many remote rural districts, were as stupidly patient and irrationally loyal as any Carinthian boor. Men would look up from their work and scowl as the wicked squire rode by, and perhaps growl a curse under their breath; but none murmured or complained aloud: even in the ale-house, when tongues were loosened by liquor, only a glum, significant silence followed the mention of his name. So long as Horace Vernon was not thwarted abroad, he cared little for being called to

account at home; and went on the tenor of his way, reckless, if not rejoicing. Nevertheless, in the great house there was discontent always, and not seldom bitter word-duels.

If the dwellers in and about Swetenham were not lucky in their landlord, they could boast of one blessing not to be despised. It was the healthiest place possible. It lay in a broad valley, sheltered to the east and north, but athwart which there was free passage for the pleasant breezes that swept over the chalk downs. So the sanitary requirements of the neighbourhood were easily satisfied; indeed, there was no more than work enough for a single practitioner.

For nearly fifty years this post had been filled by a certain Doctor Thorner—all medical men were “doctors” in those parts and those days, without regard to their precise diploma or degree. You needed only to watch him jogging along behind his sober old pony, and coming to a stand-still wherever he got a chance of a gossip on the road or over a gate, to guess at once that there was seldom urgent need for his services. In truth, these were chiefly confined to bringing young folks into the world, and helping old ones to slide out of it comfortably. But the shadow on the dial kept creeping on—a little more slowly, perhaps, than in other places—

yet still creeping on, even in Swetenham. Doctor Thorner felt less equal to his work, light as it was, and less patient of interruptions to his night's rest. He had saved more than enough to furnish thenceforward his modest needs; but was too wise to give up practice altogether, for the bread of utter idleness would certainly have disagreed with his digestion; so he determined to retire on half-pay for the present, and to take an assistant. One fine morning a new doctor appeared in Swetenham.

James Kendall was a man of about thirty, with a sharp fox face and foxy hair; a low though not a pleasant voice; and a manner that most people found disagreeably obsequious. The master of Vernon Mallory was not easily surfeited with servility: from the very first he seemed to take a fancy to the new-comer; and treated him with more courtesy—cold as it was—than he had ever shown to the homely old man who had assisted at his own birth, and the deaths of both his parents.

The discords and bickerings at the great house had waxed bitterer of late; indeed, ever since the establishment there of Mademoiselle Adèle Deshon in the quality of governess. She was a Provençale; rather piquante than pretty: perhaps her only real attractions were large velvety eyes, and a superb contralto voice, perfectly trained. The squire was

really fond of music, and himself no mean performer; so it was only natural that he should take pleasure in Mademoiselle Adèle's performances, and, to a certain extent, pleasure in her society. But Lady Eleanor Vernon in nowise saw the matter in this light. She did not care to dissemble her dislike to the foreigner; and soon was not ashamed to put her suspicions into words. Ere long reports came to her ears that fanned the jealous embers into flame—reports of meetings, frequent and prolonged, not in her presence; and of words and actions that Griselda would scarce have looked on tamely. Then the Lady Eleanor took up the daggers in earnest; and there was a battle-royal—a battle such as the servants, unhappily used to such scenes, spoke of afterwards with 'bated breath—a battle that was bound, one way or another, to be decisive.

Oddly enough, the event was not such as might have been expected from the relative strength of the belligerents. At the moment when she seemed certain of defeat, Lady Eleanor, for the first time in her matronly broils, fell back upon her "family;" and that army of reserve turned the fortunes of the day. With all his violence, Horace Vernon was not blinded by passion; though he might utterly disregard the good or bad opinion of his poorer neighbours, he was by no means indifferent to the opinion

of the county at large, or inclined to risk his own position therein. He knew very well that this would be jeopardised, and seriously too, if he were brought into open collision with the House of Arlington—a house thrice as powerful as his own, and not less unscrupulous than himself in the exercise of their power. If Lady Eleanor betook herself to her own people, insisting on a separation, with grounds of complaint just and grave, the squire guessed that place would no longer be found for him amongst the magnates of the land. Many who never troubled themselves to sift reports, or inquire into village scandal, would have been earnest enough in their partisanship when it was a question of Lady Eleanor Vernon's wrongs.

Though the squire cursed and stormed more savagely than his wont, evidently weakness was at the bottom of all that fume and fury. The wife kept her temper in a manner marvellous for one of her character—kept her ground too steadfastly—and at last carried her point, as she well deserved.

It chanced that James Kendall came to Vernon Mallory that same afternoon to visit one of the household. After leaving his patient he was summoned to the squire's study, and remained closeted there for a full hour. When he drove away, there

was a great satisfaction on his cunning face, tempered by the momentary distaste of a man who has bound himself to perform some hard or unpleasant service on exceedingly remunerative terms. Immediately afterwards, Mademoiselle Deshon was called into her master's presence. The interview was long, and, if domestic tittle-tattle is to be believed, very tempestuous. Some servants passing near the study-door heard the Provençale's rich round voice strained and shrill in plaint or reviling; answered by the deep harsh tones that, when Horace Vernon was angered, sounded like the growl of distant thunder. When Mademoiselle Adèle came forth, she went straight to her own chamber, whence she emerged no more that evening; but one of the housemaids, who crossed her on her way thither, averred that "Mam'sell looked as pale as a turnip, and her eyelids were as red and puffed as ripe gooseberries." The next morning the village gossips—there were gossips in an out-of-the-way hamlet five-and-twenty years ago—were startled by the news that the new doctor had been for some time past engaged to the governess at the great house, and that the marriage would take place shortly.

A week later, it was noised abroad that Doctor Thorner had, for a liberal consideration, been induced to abandon his practice altogether to his as-

sistant; and that thenceforward Swetenham and the neighbourhood would be under James Kendall's sole medical care.

It was a very quiet wedding. The only person of any importance present was the squire himself, whose louring face would have suited a funeral better than such a ceremony; and neither the bride nor the bridegroom looked precisely like people whose uttermost happiness is crowned. Before Adèle had been long a wife, a weakness in her lungs displayed itself—at least, so her husband said, and he, of course, must have known best—that could only be arrested by removal to a warmer climate. So she went to her own people in Provence, and abode with them nearly twelve months. She returned to all appearance perfectly recovered, bringing with her a handsome dark-haired boy—extraordinarily forward for a yearling—who had already been christened “in honour”—Adèle was wont to murmur demurely—“of our good friend and benefactor up yonder.” The precise nature of such benevolence she never cared to define; neither into such matters was it anybody's special business to inquire.

In the twenty years that ensued, Doctor Kendall certainly prospered. He was clever in his profession, and wrought many cures in cases where honest old Thorner would have thrown up his hands

in despair; and his practice had largely increased, especially since the branch railway was begun; for the navvies were not only always cutting and maiming themselves after their fashion, but also infected the neighbourhood with evil habits of debauch and drink. So grist flowed in fast to the medical mill—not quite fast enough though for all the luxuries in which his wife indulged, nor for the expensive education of his son. Being an only child, it was perhaps likely that Horace should be much indulged; but one or two of the more sharp-sighted of Kendall's neighbours thought the doctor's manner was scarcely that of an overfond father. He seemed to yield to the boy's whims, and overlook his insolence, rather because it was politic than pleasant for him so to do. With each year Horace, too, seemed less inclined to cumber himself with putting on even a decent semblance of filial respect. All the affection he had to spare centred itself in his mother, who certainly deserved it by her intense devotion: it was a great trial to both when Horace left home to live permanently in London, on his appointment to a clerkship in the Rescript Office.

Retribution for the sins of his youth had come heavily, in more ways than one, on the master of Vernon Mallory. He had plunged deep into speculation of late years, with the headlong obstinacy of

a man who will listen to no counsels but his own, believing the rest of mankind to be either fools or knaves. He struggled out of the quagmire, not absolutely ruined, but crippled in income for the rest of his life. The expenses of his family—though he grudged every shilling not spent on his own comfort—added to his numerous ailments, caused the squire to break up his establishment, and reside almost always abroad. His last act before leaving England, was to exert his influence to obtain that clerkship in the Rescript Office for Horace Kendall. Competitive examinations were not as yet; and Vernon of Vernon Mallory had always shown himself a stanch adherent to the party then in power. It was not a great boon for a man to ask, who brought up as many votes to an election as he could count tenants; for none of these had yet been found bold or enlightened enough to run counter to their lord's will. Such a patriot would have been dismissed very speedily to ruminate in fresh pastures on the blessings of independence and the privileges of our glorious constitution.

Horace Kendall began life under auspices exceptionally favourable for a country apothecary's son. He had personal advantages of no mean order. His face was decidedly handsome, in the *jeune premier* style, with a delicacy of feature almost

effeminate; and he had the eloquent Provençal eyes; his figure was, though long and loosely hung, one of those that make up well under the hands of an artistic tailor; his manner, though sometimes rather affected, was not devoid of a certain grace; and by some mysterious means there was provided for him an allowance more than sufficient.

Yet, for a while, he seemed not likely to make the best of a good start, and amongst his immediate associates was decidedly unpopular. The Rescript Office men were not more fastidious than other civil servants; but they generally contrived to find out something concerning the antecedents of each fresh recruit to their small and select company. There were several among them not much, if at all, superior to Kendall in birth—according to his reputed parentage—who got on perfectly with their fellows, both in and out of office-hours. But then these men bore themselves modestly, not with the assumption in which Horace saw fit to indulge.

There are degrees and differences in conceit, as everyone knows. There is the light, frothy conceit, easily blown away with a strong breath, which not unfrequently floats on the surface of a generous nature. There is the puerile conceit of the spoiled page, which provokes a not ill-natured laugh from manhood, and often meets encouragement from

women. Lastly, there is the conceit ingrain,—at which none are inclined to smile, even if they chafe not thereat—that betrays itself not so much by vaunting words as by subtle self-assertion. This last, surely, never, since the world begun, has been known to leaven stuff out of which brave or wise or honest men are made.

“A natural curiosity,” said Walter Rougemont, the heraldic authority of the Rescript Office. “That supercilious look of his yesterday, and the way in which he minced out ‘Cheltenham’ when Good-enough talked of having been at school there, was quite a study. But when I want to see natural curiosities I go to a museum. If he knew his own interests, he would not always be provoking people to ask ‘who is he?’ I’m not quite clear about it yet; but I have more than a vague notion that, if he’s any right to armorial bearings, it is as a ‘Fitz’-somebody or other. I vote we begin seriously to take the conceit out of him. The man’s a perfect nuisance, as he stands.”

Now this exhaustive process, however sanitary in the end, is intensely disagreeable to the patient. Kendall’s self-sufficiency was in no wise proof against the keen shafts that ever and anon sought out the joints of his harness; and, when he was free from such annoyance, the sence of isolation was

almost more intolerable. Ere long, Horace felt so thoroughly ill at ease that he was sorely tempted to resign, and seek fortune elsewhere. Whilst his first London season was yet young, all such notions vanished, and his social prospects brightened suddenly.

Kendall's visiting-list was, thus far, very limited; but he chanced one night to be present at a large musical party whereat most of the *cognoscenti* then in London were assembled. He knew hardly any one there; and hovered rather disconsolately near the piano, where somehow he felt more at home. It was not a set programme, and there was plenty of room for amateurs as well as professionals to display their talent; but it was late before the mistress of the house bethought herself of asking Kendall to sing.

"He has rather a singing face," she thought, "and must be fond of music, or he would not have been hovering round the instrument all night."

Horace complied very willingly. He was not a whit troubled with bashfulness, and reckoned—not without reason—on some sort of a triumph, though most assuredly not on such a one as he obtained. His audience were fairly taken by storm. Professionals were not less enthusiastic than amateurs in their praise of the purest tenor voice that had been

heard in London saloons for many a day; and those who understood such matters best affirmed that there was in it a latent power that only needed to be developed to surpass many of high renown on the stage.

Thenceforward, Horace's immediate future was assured. On the morrow morning he woke and found himself the Fashion: what that terse and rather vulgar expression signifies, everyone knows. Before long, as far as evening parties were concerned, he was only troubled by the embarrassment of choice. His fellows in the Rescript Office liked him perhaps not a whit better; but they could not help feeling a certain pride at counting amongst their subalterns such a celebrity; and they could not deny that he had some right to give himself airs now—the which privilege Kendall was not minded to neglect.

Adèle Kendall was not a model, either as a wife or a mother: but the wisest and purest of women need not have been ashamed of such tears as clouded her eyes as she laid down the letter in which her son's first success was set forth, and in a long sweet day-dream built up a stately air-temple, fit one day to be her idol's shrine.

Amongst those who cultivated the new celebrity most assiduously, was the Lady Longfield men-

tioned above, concerning whom Hugh of Nithsdale spoke so irreverently. She was one of those worthy widows, with hearts even larger than their purses, who seem to thrive nowhere so naturally as on English soil, who always mean thoroughly well by their generation, even if they do not greatly contribute to its credit or well-being. Amongst all followers of that *haute vénerie*, there was found no more intrepid "lion-hunter." "Lion-slayer" to boot she was called by her detractors; in truth, sooner or later, in one fashion or another, her *protégés* generally managed to come to grief. But, putting a little harmless vanity aside, she had no selfish motive in the pursuit; and, though her days of mourning lasted not long, no one regretted more sincerely the shortcomings or downfall of her favourites. For the time being, she spoiled them intensely, and no amount of disappointments could teach her discretion in patronage. She might be as plaintive as you please overnight; but the joy of a fresh and rarer discovery was almost sure to come with the morning; and her moan over the monarch of her affections was scarcely made, before on her lips resounded a jubilant—"Long live the king!"

It was very pleasant to have the *entrée* at all canonical hours to that charming mansion in Mayfair, where every domestic detail was faultless, and

visitors found themselves metaphorically, no less than literally, on velvet; but the atmosphere would have been pernicious to a healthier nature than Horace Kendall's. Very few men of his age can occupy the oracular tripod round which clouds of incense are always steaming, with senses sober and clear; and fewer still can feed on flattery daily, without waxing overweening as Jeshurun on the rich, unwholesome diet.

Lady Longfield did not scruple to suggest to her new favourite that he should abandon at once mechanical quill-driving, and seek fame and fortune on the operatic stage. To this plan Horace lent a not unwilling ear. Whilst it was yet immature, he wrote to Swetenham setting forth this new project, in perfect confidence of its meeting with assent and encouragement. Had the answer rested with her alone, it is certain Mrs. Kendall would have tried to promote this like any other whim of her spoiled darling; but she was fain to take others into counsel. Within a week there came from across the seas a veto curt, stern, and decisive, that neither mother nor son dared disregard; so for the present Horace was fain to content himself with private ovations, instead of aspiring to public triumphs.

There was a faint savour of bitterness in the luscious cup that day by day he drained so eagerly.

His presence was sought by many melomaniacs of high degree: yet his overweening vanity did not blind him to the fact that it was in a semi-professional capacity that he was welcomed in their houses. Only at Lady Longfield's he was thoroughly at home. His hostesses were charmingly civil and grateful; but after their most elaborate compliments and expansive thanksgiving, he felt as if he were being paid in kind, if not in coin. Their daughters were liberal of pretty speeches and smiles; but somehow he never found his way into a *coterie*; and with every advantage of time and place, he could never bring off one of the cosy "two-handed cracks" contrived, even in the heart of a crowded assembly, by barbarians who had not so much as heard of the chromatic scale.

With men he was not a whit more popular than before he began to be famous. They had no purpose to serve in gaining his "most sweet voice;" and troubled themselves very little with his whims or his ways—always excepting certain *parvenus* and their parasites, to whom notoriety was a sufficient attraction. Not many seemed to care for more than a nodding acquaintance with Kendall; and when he sought to be admitted into a certain club—not ill-naturedly exclusive as a rule—he was "pilled" pitilessly.

With all his fatuity, Horace had a keen cunning eye for his own interests, and very just ideas as to the wisdom of filling his garner whilst the sun shone. A marriage that by connection, if not by mere dowry, would assure his position thenceforth for ever, was the aim set steadfastly before him. There was nothing wildly improbable in such ambition. Was he not, in common with other frequenters of the Mile, dazzled daily by the gorgeous equipages of Camille Desmoulins, who, not long ago, had been content with the modest salary of a second-rate tenor; and was it not known how the said Camille, with no other exertion—bodily or intellectual—had so warbled himself into the good graces of a wealthy widow, that she proffered him the guardianship of her venerable person, and of her vast worldly goods? Kendall knew himself to be an adventurer, and felt no shame in avowing it to himself; reckoning his chances and resources quite coolly, he came to the conclusion that he had the pull of most of his rivals in the ignoble race.

Nevertheless, the curtain dropped on the summer season, the country visits that engrossed all his autumn furlough were over, the mild dissipations of winter were past—and his object as yet assumed no more definite form and substance, than the shadows that cross magic mirrors or glide past the watchers

on All-Hallows-eve. Horace waxed discontented, if not disappointed; but, before the spring was far advanced, there came a salve to his wounded vanity.

Gwendoline—more familiarly called Nina Marston—was, as the most indulgent of her friends and kinsfolk allowed, “a very odd girl.” She was not eighteen yet, so that her character could scarcely have developed itself: nevertheless even now it presented the strangest contrast of weakness and strength. In what manner Lady Daventry’s children were trained has already been told. Nina was no exception to the general *laissez-aller* rule; indeed, being decidedly independent, not to say turbulent, by nature, she emancipated herself sooner than Rose had done from the light thralldom of the governess; and, being less a favourite with her mother, was left more entirely to her own devices. She was as different as possible from her sister, physically no less than morally. Till you remembered how such peculiarities reappear capriciously after the lapse of generations, and that within the last century and a half there had come a Spanish cross into the Marston blood, you would have been puzzled to account for the wavy black hair, and the eyes more intensely black that lit up the small resolute face. After being an hour in Nina Marston’s company, and watching the play of her lips, you guessed that she was a

woman already in wilfulness and tenacity of purpose; yet impulsive withal, and romantic to a degree most uncommon in these days, when our very school-girls smile at the love-conceits which beguiled their grand-dames, even as *they* may have smiled at the philandering of Arcadia.

It was at the very beginning of Nina's first season, before her presentation dress was ordered, that she met Horace Kendall at a morning concert, and heard him sing. As she drove home she said to herself, "she had met her fate." Now, in the mouths of most girls, such words would have been a mere form of romantic speaking; with Nina, it unhappily was not so. She was none of the melodramatic heroines who talk by rote; but one of those who play out their parts, good or bad, only too naturally.

They met tolerably often after that first day. Horace Kendall was no dunce in such matters; but it needed no expert to decipher the language of the great earnest eyes, that rested on him with such rapt attention whilst he was singing, and followed him afterwards, till they hid themselves shyly under their long lashes if their pursuit was detected. He came to the Nithsdale ball with a pleasant conviction of "having made an impression in that quarter," and a firm resolve to work out the chance to the uttermost.

Lady Daventry did not bow down and worship before the newly-discovered star. She was quite content with her own set; and found her house sufficiently attractive, without calling in the aid of talent, professional or otherwise. Nevertheless, Horace was sufficiently well-acquainted with her to warrant his seeking an introduction to Nina early in the evening. Lady Daventry was not at the best of times a vigilant chaperon; and all her energies that night were engrossed in giving aid and encouragement to her elder daughter: she performed the presentation almost mechanically, and was too busy afterwards to notice the flirtation which gave umbrage to Hugh of Nithsdale. Had she known of it, it is possible that the haughty dame would not have lain down to rest without a single misgiving of the complete success of the entertainment.

Rose Nithsdale was too thoroughly good-natured to get anyone, gentle or simple, into a scrape if she could possibly avoid it; and had a great horror even of the mildest domestic discussion. She stood in no great awe of Lady Daventry, who was, in truth, anything but a stern duenna. Nevertheless, she resolved that the punishment-parade should be strictly private; and, on some pretext or another, carried Nina off into her own dressing-room before she said a word concerning the misdemeanor of overnight.

When Lady Nithsdale did speak, she spoke very much to the purpose, and with most unwonted earnestness and energy; but the culprit was quite impenitent, and seemed inclined to justify, if not to glory in her guilt.

"I never heard so much ado about nothing," she said. "If I had waltzed five times running, or sat out half the night, with Regy Avenel, or any of that lot, I shouldn't have heard a word about it; and I don't see why Mr. Kendall isn't as good as any of them, though he don't happen to be in your set."

"We know who 'that lot' are at all events," Rose Nithsdale said; "and of Mr. Kendall we know absolutely nothing, except that he sings charmingly. Regy Avenel would never have dreamed of compromising a child like you at her first ball."

"No, he only compromises married women. So kind of him—isn't it? So kind of you, too, to sacrifice yourselves to keep us out of harm's way. I thought you were too well-amused last night, Rosie, to watch other people amusing themselves."

"I didn't watch you; but Hugh told me this morning—" the Countess checked herself abruptly, biting her pretty lip; she saw she had made a false move.

"Hugh is more than old enough to be my father,

"I'm quite aware of that," Nina retorted; "but while papa's alive I don't see that he's any right to treat me paternally. He'll have enough to do in looking after one Marston, I fancy, without taking all the family on his hands."

It was hard indeed to ruffle Lady Nithsdale's easy indolent temper; but she began to be provoked at the stubbornness of the reckless little rebel, and that last thrust touched her nearly. She rose up with no bad imitation of matronly dignity, considering how seldom she had tried to assume it.

"You're very ungrateful, Nina, and you speak very improperly about Hugh. It's only too good of him to try to keep you out of mischief. I didn't mean to worry mamma with this nonsense, but as you are so self-willed I must tell her about it. Perhaps she will make you listen to reason."

The stubborn defiant face changed into a look almost of terror. Nina was not the least afraid of her mother's anger; but she was mortally afraid of being put under surveillance: that would materially interfere with the carrying out of divers ingenious schemes, floating since last night in her busy brain.

"O Rosie, you won't do that!" she whispered coaxingly, nestling close to her sister's side. "I didn't mean to be ungrateful either to you or to

Hugh—I didn't indeed. If you only won't speak to mamma, I promise to be as good as you please."

Lady Nithsdale was only too happy to accept the olive-branch; she hated the idea of haling anyone before the judgment-seat. In her own heart, she felt that she was no more fitted to play the monitress, even to that wilful child, than to teach a class in a Sunday-school. So she consented readily enough to connive for that once at Nina's derogation; and, without actually becoming surety for her sister, contrived to persuade her husband that the offence should be repeated no more.

CHAPTER VII.

MARK RAMSAY was none of those over-eager hunters who mar their own sport by impatience in the stalk. Every footfall that brought him nearer to his quarry was cautiously planted; so that no rustle of leaf or grass-blade should startle in her fancied security the fair hind he had marked for his own. Yet day by day, almost hour by hour, the distance between them lessened.

To those who knew Blanche Ellerslie, it would have seemed impossible that any man—not standing in the place of her accepted suitor—should find the field clear of rivalry more or less dangerous. Mark Ramsay's attentions were never persecuting or obtrusive—seldom, indeed, so marked as they had been at the Nithsdale ball. Yet, somehow or other, the "old loves," whose name was legion, found that an invisible circle was being drawn around her, wherein there was no rest for the soles of their feet. The small ear, that used to listen so readily, had grown strangely deaf to whispers of late; the delicate lips answered kindly and courteously, but no longer with the old temptations of mockery or gibe; the

soft eloquent eyes had grown pensive, and sometimes full of an anxiety which the most confident admirer could not flatter himself *he* inspired.

Even Oswald Gauntlet, the famous and fatal horse-gunner (by the rules of the service he had been transferred twice or thrice into a field-battery, but even the War Office had not the heart to keep him there), who, ever since their first flirtation on first principles—begun when Blanche was scarcely seventeen, and Oswald a beardless *aide-de-camp*—had retained his post of High Confidant at the capricious little despot's court, no matter how other ministers were changed, found himself, to all intents and purposes, shelved. He was a warning to all "scufflers" present and to come, as he stood apart twisting his long tawny moustache in angry bewilderment; always beset by the same dreary doubt—"Whether it was worth while to come up all the way from Woolwich for *this*"—"this" meaning a passing fan-salute, or careless smile, or perchance a few words to which all the world might have listened and been none the wiser.

Now the thought of making Blanche Ellerslie his wife had never dwelt for an instant in Major Gauntlet's mind. He was too poor a man to dream of such a luxury, and he had never in his life

spoken to her passionate or over-earnest words: but he was really attached to her in his own fashion, and he felt their estrangement keenly. Furthermore, putting all jealousies aside—he was fain to confess to himself that he was jealous at last—Oswald happened to have heard more than most people of Mark Ramsay's past; and he would have been sorry to see any woman, for whom he cared ever so little, given over to that man's keeping. One morning, Major Gauntlet went to lunch in Craven Square; with the fixed resolve, if he found opportunity, to take heart of grace, and say out his say.

La Reine Gaillarde had a fine instinct in such matters; and somehow guessed that it would not be disagreeable, to one of her guests at least, if she left them alone. Any ordinary flirtation she was rather inclined to countenance than to hinder; and she was only too ready to aid and abet in anything that might possibly weaken Ramsay's growing influence over Blanche Ellerslie. So, when they went upstairs after luncheon, the fair widow found herself *en champ clos*; with no possibility of escape unless by absolute flight, which she was not cowardly enough to contemplate. Had she not been five hundred times before alone with Oswald Gauntlet; and was it not too utterly absurd to feel awkward now? In spite of all this, she felt so nervous that

it was almost a relief to her when he actually broke ground.

"I have been waiting for this chance some time, Blanche"—she was quite a girl when he came on her father's staff, and he had called her ever since by her Christian name—"and I'm not going to waste it by talking nonsense now. You know pretty well how much and how little I like you; and you know too, whether I have deserved to be dropped as I have been of late. Good God! you're not going to deny it?" he broke out fiercely, seeing that she was about to speak. "Surely we're too good friends still, to begin that kind of fencing. I'm not going to quarrel with you; and, what's more, I don't complain. If a woman chooses that old acquaintance should be forgot, she is only using her woman's privilege. It's of your new acquaintance I'm going to speak."

Mrs. Ellerslie had sat a picture of pretty penitence till now, with bowed head and drooping eyelashes; at those last words, she drew herself up, and looked straight into Gauntlet's face.

"You mean Mr. Ramsay, I suppose."

"Could I mean any other? Now, Blanche, just be patient and hear me out. I sha'n't bore you any more, after to-day. If I had asked you to marry me, any time when you were free, you'd

have said 'No,' I daresay. That's neither here nor there; but, why I never could ask you, you know as well as I do. When I heard you were going to be married to poor Ellerslie, I didn't like it at first, but I never grudged him his luck; and now, if I heard that the same luck had befallen any true honest man, I wouldn't grudge it him—I wouldn't, by G—d! But I should grudge it to Ramsay; for I don't believe he's either honest or true."

They had known each other very long, and Oswald had often amused himself with teasing the pettish little beauty; but he had never before seen real anger in her eyes.

"And that is your idea of truth and honesty," she said, speaking very low—"to revenge yourself for neglect that was never intended, by coming here to say to me what you never would dare to say to him!"

Major Gauntlet had won his Cross, not by a single act of foolhardiness, but by repeated proofs of disciplined valour; and he could well have afforded to have passed over such a suspicion coming from a man's lips. Coming from a woman's, it only made him smile.

"Wouldn't I?" he said simply. "You are a very clever woman, Blanche Ellerslie—accustomed to read men's hearts, and all the rest of it—and

you know best, of course. Now I fancied, as I lay awake this morning, that there was nothing I should like better, than to say to Mark Ramsay—what I say to you—that he's not a fit person to be trusted with the happiness of any woman alive. There's not the least necessity for your telling me I have no right to interfere between him and you. I'm perfectly well aware of that; and another taunt like that last one won't make me forget it; but I wouldn't talk too much about 'daring' if I were you. It's bad form, to say the least of it."

Blanche was thoroughly ashamed of herself long before he had done speaking.

"Those were very base words of mine," she said; "try and forget them. I am not used to being taken to task, and everyone seems to have had a special call to do it lately; I thought I was safe with you. I have never known you so hard on my *fredaines* before: you might look sulky at first, but you always laughed at last."

"I wish I could laugh now," he said. "I'm doing no good here, I see: but, Blanche, for old acquaintance' sake, answer me one question; never mind whether I've a right to ask it or not. In spite of all you have heard or may hear, do you mean to marry Ramsay?"

"He has never asked me."

The sentence meant little, but the shy, conscious look, and the trembling of the voice, meant—all. The other knew that darker proofs of Ramsay's unworthiness than he was prepared to bring forward, would only embitter Blanche against himself, without turning her aside one hair's-breadth from the path she was bent on pursuing. He rose up, with both her tiny hands in his own; and his handsome face was very pale, though he strove to speak lightly.

"Don't let us part in anger, because I was fool enough to think that my warning would not come too late. Perhaps you'll need a friend yet before you die: when you do, you'll not forget me, if I'm to the fore? I sha'n't see much of you for some months to come. I've been offered to go on this Commission that is to visit all the great fortresses and camps of Europe—a good thing for me, in more ways than one, just now. I suppose everything will be settled before I come back. So—good-bye, Blanche, and God bless you!"

Oswald Gauntlet was by no means a devout man. I fear he seldom attended public worship unless on duty, or some such sort of compulsion; and perhaps was not always regular in his private orisons. But no fanatic, trailing himself from shrine to shrine, ever uttered a petition more thoroughly

heartfelt and earnest than was contained in those last three words. Whether that prayer reached the base of the Mercy-seat, or whether, like many petitions formed by more saintly lips, it was borne idly away by one of the winds that never blow in heaven, you will know hereafter who have patience to read to the end.

Thus the lady was left in possession of the field, whereon, to say the least of it, she had held her own. Yet she did not seem triumphant or victorious, as she sat there with her face buried in the sofa-pillow for some minutes after she was left alone. When she looked up again her eyes were wet.

Her best friends—Laura Brancepeth for example—called her a cruel coquette; yet there was much of softness, if not of tenderness, in her nature. That same inconsistency has been noticed in much more famous criminals. Mahomet's cat, and Couthon's lapdog, are matters of history; and Count Fosco's canary has always seemed to me one of the happiest touches in a very powerful picture. Though she had wrought so much harm in her time, Blanche had never with malice or of aforethought injured any living thing. Her repentance was not keen or durable enough to keep her from falling into fresh temptation: yet each and every one of her victims

might have been consoled by knowing that Blanche's heart wore for him a decent half-mourning. In one respect Mrs. Ellerslie had exceptional luck. Amongst womankind she had enemies not a few: but men—no matter what wrong they had suffered at her hands—seemed incapable of nourishing rancour against her; in almost any company there might have been found champions ready and willing to buckler her good name against whomsoever should presume to assail it. She was really fond of her cage-birds, though she teased them so terribly; and it was not her vanity only that suffered, when one of these found the use of his wings and escaped from bondage.

Major Gauntlet was not an ordinary pet. Till within the last two months, she had liked and admired him more than anyone she had known. A soldier's daughter and a soldier's wife—she was able to appreciate soldierly renown: she liked to think that she had at her beck and call one whom brave hearts were proud to follow; and to carry on light word-warfare with the man whose name carried terror with it wherever it was spoken along the north-western frontier of India. Many maids and matrons, since Una walked in forest-land, have found it pleasant pastime to dally with the mane of a couchant lion. She knew that Oswald had left

her not in anger, and that she might count on his friendship now and always; but she knew, too, that it could never be the same between them any more; and that the ancient intimacy—half-sportive, half-tender—had that day gotten its death-blow.

When, after discreet absence, Laura Brancepeth returned, she found Mrs. Ellerslie looking so sorrowful, that she could not forbear questioning.

"There's nothing the matter," Blanche said, with a little sob; "only I do so hate saying good-bye; and that is what Oswald Gauntlet came here to say. He's going abroad, for I don't know how long, on some stupid Commission or another."

Now La Reine Gaillarde had an implicit belief in the dashing horse-gunner—not in matters martial alone—and had reckoned rather confidently on him as a counter-agent on the present occasion. It was provoking to her that he had so readily beaten retreat, and left the field clear for other invading forces.

"Rather a sudden resolution, wasn't it? It was only the night before last, that Major Gauntlet was talking to me about his summer plans; and travelling on the Continent was certainly not one of them. I wouldn't worry myself too much about saying good-bye, Blanche, if I were you. You'll have to say it,

sooner or later, to more than one old friend, I fancy. It's to be hoped the new ones will make you amends."

It was not often that Mrs. Ellerslie was at a loss for a reply; but now she could frame none—unless a low reproachful whisper, "O, Queenie!" could be called such—and escaped to her own room.

Those two were very silent during their drive. When they drew up under their favourite tree in the Mile, the least observant of her courtiers saw that something had ruffled the quick temper of La Reine Gaillarde; and the most successful of those who strove to engross Mrs. Ellerslie's attention was scarcely rewarded with a languid smile. Whilst that especial carriage halted there was always a kind of circle round it: but, by some strange coincidence, one familiar face was missing—the face of Mark Ramsay.

CHAPTER VIII.

"AND is this your last—your very last answer?"

Mark Ramsay spoke quite calmly, almost unconcernedly; yet his thoughts were very bitter just then. He had very seldom left on the board the stake in any game on the winning of which he had thoroughly set his heart's desire—so seldom, indeed, that nine men out of ten, on the strength of their evil success, would have grown overweening in confidence. But Mark was none of these. He deemed that the Devil's luck, like any other luck, would run itself out at last; and was prepared at any moment to see the intermittence set in. From personal vanity, pure and simple, he was, as has been afore-said, singularly free; and he could calculate his own chances of success or failure just as coolly as if he had been looking over a third person's game. All this only made him feel his present disappointment more keenly. He had never been more sure of any one thing in his life, than of Blanche Ellerslie's assent whenever he should ask her to marry him.

He knew perfectly well with what manner of woman he was dealing, and was prepared from the first to meet all the wiles of finished coquetry. But

over the perfection of any art whatsoever, Nature will sometimes prevail. Smiles may be feigned, glances be tutored, and voices be trained to tremble; but Cleopatra herself, though she might counterfeit a blush, could not summon up at will the faint, tender glow of happiness which, at the sound of a certain footstep or the glimpse of a certain figure, has caused ere now many ill-favoured faces to wax for the nonce pleasant and comely. For such signs Ramsay's practised eyes had watched often and earnestly of late, and had not watched in vain. He could not accuse himself of being precipitate now in pressing his suit. And what manner of answer had he just listened to? It was not an absolute refusal; but still less was it one of those feminine Nays concerning which so many pleasant conceits have been indited both in poesy and prose. The plea for delay was too earnestly urged, and too steadily persisted in, to be set down to coy subterfuge.

That delays are dangerous, none knew better than Ramsay. If the fortress to which he laid siege could not be carried at once, he guessed that its defences were not likely to be weakened by the according of a truce. Nevertheless, within that same fortress much doubt and difficulty prevailed just now.

Mrs. Ellerslie was, in all ways, of the world worldly; yet the veriest country girl, hovering on the verge of first love, could not be more single-minded in intent than Blanche had been of late. Not one mercenary motive entered into her preference for Mark Ramsay. She might have landed quite as heavy, if not heavier, fish ere now, if she had cared to work the waters where the big trout lie more patiently; but she had wealth more than sufficient to satisfy all her whims; and as yet had never been seriously tempted to exchange the freedom of the Allée des Veuves for any prison whatsoever, even if the walls were of jasper and the gates of wrought gold. As for ambition—that is another affair. Blanche was too thorough a woman, not to savour her triumph in holding at her discretion the “stag of ten,” against whom younger and fairer huntresses had emptied their quivers in vain. She was well aware that many matrons, who turned indignantly away from Mark Ramsay lingering at her side, would have found gracious glances for him, lounging in their own drawing-rooms; and that the pity they feigned to feel for her would scarce have been extended to their own daughters, had these been exposed to like temptation; she was keenly alive, too, to the delight of successful rivalry. But putting all these incitements aside, she felt for Mark

Ramsay what she had never felt for any man alive or dead. It was not only a strong liking, but a growing sense of dependence which almost frightened her, intensely pleasant though it was. From her girlhood upwards she had scoffed pitilessly at the substance of Love, though she had ever been coquetting with his shadow: but she felt misgivings now, lest she should have been overrash in her gay defiance. Yet, had the choice been given her, she would not have drawn back one step on the road that seemed to trend towards the house of bondage.

All this being premised, it seems hard to understand why she should hesitate and plead for delay when Mark asked for her hand. It was scarcely prudence withheld her; but rather one of those presentiments that are such true prophets, though they speak more darkly than the oracles, whose utterances were whispered on the winds of Dodona, or through the smoke of Delphi. All the warnings that she had put aside and tried to forget came back upon her now; and she could not drive them away. The friends who had spoken those warnings might not have been very safe counsellors as a rule, and certainly were little apt to preach; but she knew that they had spoken honestly for her good—ay, and not without sound reason.

"Not fit to be trusted with the happiness of any woman alive."

How sharply she had checked Oswald Gauntlet when he spoke these words! But her heart heard them over again, sleeping or waking, often enough since. They rang in her ears like a church-bell, that never wearies of its message of truth and kindness to sinners, whether they will hearken or no. From the first moment when she looked on her suitor's face, she had tried to believe that much of the ill-report concerning him was idle gossip or scandal: yet, at this very moment, she remembered that without fire there is no smoke; and that creatures more innocent than herself—innocent as the children that were burned before Moloch—might ere now have passed through the furnace of Mark Ramsay's evil passions.

It was very true that the love he now proffered brought with it no shame; nevertheless, the gift might be fatal. On men of his stamp, vows are not more binding because they have been spoken before an altar. Spirits so hard to tame stand in small awe of a simple wedding-ring. Moreover, if the Talmud speak true, the talisman whereby King Solomon controlled the Djinns, could not save him from betrayal by the Shulamite.

Warning and presentiment availed just so much

as to make her hesitate—no more. For her life she could not have spoken the words that would have sent Mark Ramsay away from her for ever. When he said, "Is this your very last answer?" she could only look up at him timidly, murmuring,

"You must not be angry: you must be patient. If you knew all I have heard, you would not wonder."

His face began to harden.

"Rare tales, I dare be sworn. With all the talent for invention that is abroad, it's very odd better novels are not written nowadays. And do you think it is only about me that *fabliaux* are made? I find it so much pleasanter to take people as I find them, instead of on hearsay; and so much wiser not to trouble myself with what happened before my time. But if one were to believe half one hears—Mrs. Ellerslie, as you are so fond of listening to stories, I'll tell you one. It's not very sensational; but it's true.

"When people told you so much about my past, did they tell you that some time ago I spent twelve months in India? No? It was so, nevertheless. I was a poor man in those days, and only too thankful to be set forward on my road, or helped in getting at the big game. I had heard a good deal of Indian hospitality before I started; but I was not prepared for half the kindness I met with. With

one regiment in particular, I lived nearly three months, at free quarters—the —th Hussars, who were quartered at Meerut. The day before I was to leave them to return home, sitting alone with the Chief in his bungalow, I naturally offered to execute any commission for him or for any other comrade.

“‘Well, there’s one thing you might do,’ Colonel Neville said, ‘but I hardly like to ask you, though it would please several others in the regiment besides me. There’s one of ours whom you have never seen yet, though you’ve heard him talked over often enough, for he’s been on the sick-list since you came here. It’s a very sad case. We liked what we saw of him immensely, when he joined, and thought we had got a real acquisition; but I don’t think he has done ten days’ duty since, nor dined a dozen times at mess. He was very shaky from the first, and he’s never given himself half a chance since; for he does nothing but mope in his bungalow, smoking like a chimney, and, I’m very much afraid, drinking to match. He don’t look fit to travel, and seems to hate the idea of going home; but the doctor says the sea voyage is his last chance. He was very loth to move; so I got his sick-leave without consulting him, and he starts to-morrow. Now, if you are not in any great hurry—you haven’t taken your passage yet, I know—I

thought perhaps you wouldn't mind looking after him as far as Calcutta. You'll have to travel slower, of course; but otherwise he won't be much trouble: he's as gentle as a girl in his ways, spite of the drink.'

"An act of simple charity was not much return for all the kindness I had met with there. So I said; and so it was settled. I did not see my travelling-companion till I called for him at his bungalow next evening. I thought I had seldom looked on a handsomer face, though death was written on it very plainly; and I was quite struck by the pleasantness of his voice as he said good-bye to his comrades; for every officer in the regiment was there to see him off. Beyond a few sentences of commonplace courtesy exchanged then, very few words passed between us that night; and, when we reached our first halting-place, he seemed so tired that I did not tempt him to talk.

"There were no railways in those days. Travelling was done by dâwk-gharries. You travel always by night, resting, if there's no necessity to push forward, during the heat of the day. I saw scarcely anything of my travelling-companion except at meals, at which he made a mere pretence of eating, and then betook himself to lay down again in his own room till it was time to start. He

did not seem inclined to talk; but his manner was very winning, and he seemed grateful to me for lingering with him on the road. So it went on, till we halted on the sixth day at a lonely station beyond Benares. When he got out of his gharry, he seemed scarce able to walk into the dâwk bungalow, and said he would try to sleep, for he could swallow no food. So I breakfasted alone, and afterwards began to doze. I woke up with a start—feeling sure that there was someone in the room near me, though I had not heard the door open.

“My companion stood there, resting his hands on the table and swaying to and fro. The sunblinds were closely drawn and the room was very dark; yet I could see his face—deathly white—and the gleaming of his great black eyes. From certain significant words dropped by my bearer I guessed what his habits had been throughout the journey, and *delirium tremens* was the first idea that crossed my mind.

“‘I’m not drunk!’ he said, as though he read my thoughts. ‘I’m dying, that’s all; and I—I daren’t die alone.’

“I sprang up just in time to catch him in my arms as he stumbled forwards; and I laid him down on my couch, from which he never stirred again. There are times, I believe, when a man must speak—even to a dog or his worst enemy—rather than

keep silence altogether. So it came to pass that I, a mere chance-acquaintance, heard his last confession, spoken slowly and painfully in the lulls between the spasms. I daresay the story is very dry and old; but I never listened to one quite like it, and it made rather a strong impression on me. I remember it almost word for word.

“He had served, till he got his lieutenancy, in a heavy-dragoon regiment; and during those three years met a woman, who—unwittingly as I thoroughly believe—turned all the current of his life awry. Neither did he accuse her. He accused only his own folly, for having been so bewitched.

“‘She was only in play,’ he said; ‘and she could not guess that it was playing the devil with me. She would not have soiled the tip of her little finger for my sake; and there’s no sin or shame on earth that I would not have worked out at the beck of that same finger. I never told her as much. I don’t think I ever said a syllable to her that her husband might not have listened to. And this is how we parted. I was going on leave to see after some of my mother’s affairs, that ought to have been attended to long before: I should not have gone even then; but she knew how things stood with me, and would have it so. To reward me for being “dutiful and obedient,” I was to have as many waltzes as I chose

at a dance that came off at barracks that night. I had heaps to do; but I managed to get there just as the first quadrille was over. She was sitting in an out-of-the-way corner, talking very earnestly to a man whom I had never seen before, though I had heard his name often enough; for, to give him his due, I believe there's no better soldier. I felt hot and savage, and then sick at heart, before she spoke.

“I wasn't to be furious. When she promised me those unlimited waltzes, she had reckoned without Oswald Gauntlet, who was a very, *very* old friend; and old friends were so exacting. He had travelled a long way to be there that night; and she had been weak enough to promise him the first waltz and galop at all events. *Après, on verrait.*”

“I felt very dizzy just then; yet not so dizzy, but, as I turned away, I heard him say, with a half-laugh,

“It's hard lines on him too, poor boy.”

“And she laughed too, as she answered:

“You were always fond of children, Oswald—fonder than I am. Shall I call back my pretty page?”

“Those were the last words I ever heard her speak; and I never saw her face again. I got away to my quarters somehow; and I got through the night—well, very much as I have got through most nights since; and the first thing I did after getting

to London was to arrange an exchange into the —th Hussars. — I never went near the old regiment again; and I never answered the letter she wrote when she heard I was going to India, though I did answer the postscript her husband added. He was a rough old martinet, but he had been really kind to me. I thought I should get rid of her by coming out here; but I haven't. The drink that has killed me has only driven her away for an hour or two. And now—Well, there's my mother, who has petted me since I was born, and who will break her heart when she hears of this. If one of the two could come and sit beside me now, it would not be the mother I'd choose. Look here: you're a real good fellow, from all I have heard' (I am speaking by rote, you know, Mrs. Ellerslie); 'and I know I can trust you. You'll see *this* buried with me; and not let any of those black devils handle it.'

"He drew out from his breast a broad gold locket in a double case. There was a photograph in the front; at the back a tiny scrap of paper with the word 'Dear.'

"'It's very absurd,' he went on, 'very childish, *she* would have called it. I cut it out of a common invitation-note: I thought it looked so well in her handwriting. Now you shall hear her name.'

"He drew my ear down close to his mouth.

“‘If ever you get a chance, I should like you to tell her that I said “God bless her!”—now.’

“Those were very nearly the last words he spoke intelligibly; for the spasms came on sharper and stronger till, half-an-hour after, he was dead. Mrs. Ellerslie, it's just possible you've guessed already that this man's name was Harry Armar; and whose face was in his locket; and why I have broken no confidence in telling you this story.”

Guessed it? Yes; she had done that long ago. Eyes, less keen than those that looked down on her, might have read so much, even before she started at the mention of Oswald Gauntlet's name. She had often felt mild penitence and self-reproach: but real remorse, never till now. For a moment, she was as much shocked and startled as if she had been brought suddenly into a chamber where a corpse was lying.

She remembered the brave, handsome boy so well; remembered how she had laughed that night at what she deemed his pettish anger; how sure she had made of his coming back to her lure; how surprised she had been when she heard of his exchange to India; how vexed when no answer came to her farewell letter; how grieved when she heard of his death. How different all would have been, had she known then what she knew now! She bowed her head in silence for a minute or two; and when she spoke it was low and brokenly.

"I have done deadly harm; though I never meant it, God knows. But I scarcely deserve that the pain should come from you. Could you not have told me this sooner, or—later?"

"I never thought of punishment," Mark answered, "for I never thought that you deserved it. Perhaps I'm not a fair judge; but, you'll remember, I believed from the first all the harm had been done unwittingly. You were amusing yourself as hundreds of women do: the only pity was, that you found out a little too late with what a brittle toy you were playing. I should fancy poor Armar was not organised to stand the wear and tear of everyday-life long, even if he had never crossed your path. Only think what gaps would be made in society, if men in general, on finding out they had mistaken jest for earnest, were to flee to the uttermost parts of the earth, to drown their disappointment in strong drink! I told you all this, partly because I was in a fashion bound to tell you some time or other; but more, because I wished you to understand that I ask no more than I offer, when I ask you to let the past bury its dead. For now—with this story, which some good-natured friends would work up into a 'sensation,' fresh from my lips—I ask you, once more, to cast in your lot with mine."

For the last few minutes Mark had kept his eyes averted from his companion's face, as though

willing to give her time to recover herself. Before he looked at her again, he knew that he had won the day. As he finished speaking, a soft hand crept into his palm, and was content to be clasped; and, as their lips met, Blanche Ellerslie knew of a surety that she had found her heart at last.

When a woman of her experience—though she was comparatively young in years—makes this discovery so late, it is by no means certain that it is for her happiness it is made. It is the old story, of the peasant suddenly made rich, by lighting on a treasure hidden in the ground that he has delved for years. There is great joy at first over the new-gotten wealth; but the cares and fears of guardianship follow soon; and there will be heard never more the light-hearted liting and ready laughter that made the cottage merry, when it held nothing that thieves would break through to steal.

Theirs was a strange wooing—strange even for these days, wherein sentiment does not greatly abound. Scarcely a word of tenderness passed between the two before they were irrevocably plighted; and such as believe in omens might have noted as an evil augury, that sharp stings of remorse were tingling in Blanche Ellerslie's breast, when she betrothed herself to a man who brought her a message from the dead.

CHAPTER IX.

LAURA BRANCEPETH could not affect surprise at the news that greeted her when she came in from driving. Nevertheless, she was exceeding wroth; and, as was her wont on such occasions, spoke somewhat unadvisedly with her lips. Blanche was too happy just then to quarrel with anyone—much less with a real friend. The sharp words only made her smile; and she answered as serenely as if she had received the warmest congratulations.

“I’m very sorry, dear. You’d have liked me to have married some great church dignitary, I do believe. But I don’t know any bachelor bishop; and, though the Dean of Torrcaster is a widower, I could not have become bone of his bone even to please you. For my part, I think it’s better for like to match with like—sinners with sinners, and saints with saints. Besides, Mark and I have sown all our wild-oats; and we shall do nothing henceforth but quiet family gardening.”

Laura Brancepeth had the outline in her mind of a retort at once scriptural and severe, relating to seeds and tares, and reaping the whirlwind; but she

got her metaphor into a tangle, and so gave it up; contenting herself with observing, that "she didn't believe in sudden conversions, but that she was tired of preaching, and only hoped the other would not one day have cause to remember her sermons when it was too late."

Mrs. Ellerslie's face put on the caressing look that women, no less than men, found it hard to withstand.

"Too late to warn, perhaps," she said; "but, Queenie, not too late too wish me happy. No one would be sorrier than you, I know, if your prophecies were by any chance to come true."

Lady Laura's gusts of temper never lasted long. She stooped and kissed her friend very affectionately.

"I do wish you happy, dear, from the bottom of my heart; and, if you should ever come to confess to me that it was otherwise, I promise you that I won't answer with—'I told you how it would be.'"

Neither could La Reine Gaillarde bear malice, for having been worsted in fair fight. She had done her very uttermost to thwart and countermine Mark Ramsay; but, now that he had finally prevailed, she was as ready to shake hands as if she had been throughout his warmest partisan. When they next

met, she greeted him quite cordially; making him free of her house at all canonical hours; and entered with great energy and goodwill into all preparations for Blanche's marriage.

There was much lawyer's work to be done; for Mrs. Ellerslie was by no means a portionless bride, and Mark's liberality in point of settlements needed rather the check than the spur. As a poor man he had always been free handed to a fault; and wealth had not made him miserly, or even careful to count the cost. In all this, beyond a few timid objections to excess of generosity, Blanche took little concern: but, when she was asked to choose her trustee, she named, without hesitation, a cousin of the late Colonel Ellerslie, and principal executor of his will. She had seen comparatively little of George Anstruther; but she knew that her husband trusted implicitly in his judgment and honour, and more than once had sought his advice and assistance. Since she became a widow, she had always found him ready and willing to assist her in business matters, of which she was ignorant as a child.

Mr. Anstruther had gone out when comparatively young to a lucrative appointment in India: interest was more powerful then than it is nowadays, and the cadets of certain families—unless actually deficient in ability—had a kind of hereditary claim to

rapid advancement. He was a just and upright man; and would have scorned to exact a doit more than his due either from rich or poor; but saving withal, with a shrewd, sagacious eye for all legitimate chances of increasing his store, and well able to sift the chaff from the grain in the tempting speculations that even then were rife in the East. So it was not wonderful that at the age of forty-five—some six years before the opening of this story—he was enabled to retire with a fortune that, added to his pension, was affluence to one of his tastes.

From the morning when George Anstruther sailed out of the Downs, to the evening when he saw the points of the Needles glimmering white through the twilight, he had never once set foot on English ground. Absence of less than a quarter of a century will make most men feel aliens at first in their birthland; with some, this feeling of estrangement never quite wears away. So it was with Anstruther. For many years he had lived almost entirely alone; for his station, though an important one, lay far up the country out of the line of traffic; and the scanty European society that lay within his reach had rather repelled than attracted him. Solitude had not made him morose or eccentric; but it had fostered the shy reserve natural to him. His habits were too set now, to be altered greatly by change of clime.

His living relatives were singularly few, and even with the nearest of these he had corresponded but rarely; so, when he landed in England, there were none who would have travelled far to bid him welcome home. Anstruther did not feel this isolation, as many would have done. Perhaps he rather rejoiced that absence of any family ties left him free to live after his own fashion, without seeming ungracious towards his kinsfolk. He paid a few duty-visits in the first few months after he landed; but these were made as brief as possible, and were never repeated. Before the year was out, he had established himself in a house on the north-western border of St. John's Wood—very modest in appearance, but sufficiently capacious to hold him and his belongings; and with ground enough around it to prevent the possibility of being hemmed in or overlooked. Other reasons, besides a fancy for seclusion, guided Anstruther in the choice of a dwelling. For some time past chemistry had been his favourite pursuit; and he had no mind that any timid or sensitive neighbour should take out an "injunction" against his laboratory.

Most of his Indian contemporaries—less lucky or less prudent than himself—were still toiling on out yonder; so in London he found few personal friends. Nevertheless, he became a member without

difficulty of the two clubs into which he sought admission—the Planet and the Orion. At one of these he was sure of a faultless dinner; at the other, sure of finding scope for the display of his rare skill at whist and piquet. Beyond some half-dozen fevers, that had left no seeds of disease behind, he had never known what sickness meant; but his daily routine was as regular as if he had been condemned to live by rule.

Winter or summer, he breakfasted always at nine; then came a huge cheroot, and the reading of the morning paper; then work in the laboratory till about noon. Then, no matter what the weather might be outside, he went out on horseback for two hours, neither less nor more; never through the streets or in the Row, but straight out into the country—not dawdling along on a leisurely constitutional; but riding quite as sharply as was good for the legs and wind of the cattle that carried him. He gave great prices for his hacks; and was too good a judge not to get his money's worth. When he came in, he changed his dress completely—solitude had not made him the least of a sloven—and drove down to the Orion, where he played whist or piquet till seven. After dressing again, unless there were special reasons for the contrary, he dined at the Planet. Though he never offered to join any other party, he

seldom dined alone. There was generally someone ready to take the second place at the corner-table to which, ere long, he acquired a prescriptive right; for it was known in the Planet that Mr. Anstruther's talent in composing a *menu*—simple or elaborate—was exceptional, and that he could talk sensibly on most subjects, without speaking *ex cathedrâ*.

"Not half a bad fellow, when you know him; and devilish shrewd, too; but wants drawing out"—was the club verdict—a pretty just one, as such verdicts commonly are.

After his black coffee, he smoked one digestive cheroot—very slowly, and in silence, for choice—and then betook himself to the Orion again, where his brougham was always waiting at midnight. After that hour he could not be tempted to begin a rubber.

Though his acquaintance, without the walls of the Planet and the Orion, was so confined, when he was permanently established in town, invitations began to drop in: but these were one and all courteously declined; and when it became known that there was no exception whatever to Mr. Anstruther's rule of never dining out and never entertaining at home, the *Amphitryons* forebore to disquiet him. Only one or two very intimate friends could tempt him sometimes to vary the even tenor of his life;

chiefest among these was Walter Ellerslie. These two were not only kinsmen, but had seen much of each other in India. Each had learned long ago to value aright the sterling qualities of the other's nature—disguised in the one case under shy, cold reserve; in the other, by a curt, incisive manner, that at its best was anything but courtly.

Colonel Ellerslie was passionately fond of whist, and a hopelessly bad player. His errors sprang not from rashness, or want of thought; but from a combination, peculiar to himself, of a set of rules, of which all that were not absurd were more or less false in principle. He was one of the most intrepid men alive; and, not only in his profession, but in ordinary life, acted, whether for right or wrong, with singular promptness and decision. When he sat down to the whist-table, the whole nature of the man seemed changed. He became timorous and vacillating to a degree; avaricious of his trumps in season and out of season; and leading from his weakest suit, rather than from ace queen. He would certainly have chosen the "happy despatch" of throwing up his hand, rather than lead up to an exposed honour.

Some years ago there flourished in the Shires a notable sportsman, from whom it was said many useful hints had been gained by such as had got a

bad start, and wished to know which way the hounds were turning. They watched the line that he was taking, and then took exactly the opposite one; and nine times out of ten were right. So, a beginner at whist might have greatly improved himself by watching Colonel Ellerslie's play whenever there was the shadow of a doubt, and thenceforth noting that card as the very last to be produced under the circumstances. Even had he been likely to take schooling patiently, he was so palpably incorrigible, that few would have wasted reproach on him, much less argument. He lived and died in happy unconsciousness of the blundering that made him a very proverb amongst those who suffered thereby. The Colonel had a great idea of playing "in good company," as he termed it,—in no wise alluding to the social position of those who made up the party, but to their celebrity at the game. He was not a member of the Orion; for, not being a rich man, he was too prudent to pit himself constantly against men by whom he felt he was overmatched; but nothing pleased him so much as an occasional rubber there. If he lost his money, as was generally the case, he grudged it not a whit; if he won, were it ever so little, he went home—prouder than Diomedes, bringing back from the Trojan camp the fatal horses of Rhesus.

When Ellerslie first appeared at the Orion, it was as Anstruther's guest; and there was great marvel that he, who would often wait for an hour or more rather than cut in at a second-rate table, should have brought in a man to whom the veriest neophyte in the club could have given one point in ten. But Anstruther only shrugged his shoulders, with a quiet smile—it was his way of declining discussion—whenever the anomaly was hinted to him; and would sit patiently for a whole evening conniving, so to speak, at the other's blunders; never once, at the most flagrant of these, lifting his shaggy gray eyebrows, that arched themselves readily enough over much more venial transgressions. Others too, less disposed to indulgence, deemed it better to suffer in silence; partly out of deference to Ellerslie's entertainer; partly because it seemed scarce safe to vent spleen, however justly provoked, on the grim old martialist.

Philosophers and politicians have ceased long ago to write treatises *De Amicitia*; and even Corinna finds graver or more passionate use for her pen, than inditing sonnets to a female favourite: the romance of sentiment rarely survives our school-days; and surely these gray-beards had cast such follies far behind them: yet I doubt if sincerer sacrifice ever

was laid on the altar of Friendship, than the one just recorded.

For his hospitality George Anstruther never would take payment in kind. When his cousin's regiment was quartered within easy distance of London, he could not be induced to visit the pretty villa in which the other had set up his household gods. Before she became a widow, he had only met Blanche Ellerslie twice—each time by accident. The duties of executorship brought them more together of necessity. Then, despite his reserve and shyness, Anstruther showed himself so thoroughly kind and considerate, that Blanche conceived a great liking for and confidence in him; and thenceforth did not scruple to rest entirely on his advice in any important matters of business. These consultations were always made by letter.

CHAPTER X.

ON a certain bright May morning, Mr. Anstruther walked in his garden, smoking slowly his after-breakfast cheroot. When he walked his step was planted firmly, never springily; and all his movements were marked by a kind of mechanical slowness. His frame, naturally tall and spare, had grown gaunt and angular under twenty-five years' endurance of eastern dust and sun. His features were roughly cast, but rather regular than otherwise; and though the cheeks and forehead were crossed by myriads of intersecting lines, none were as yet very deeply grained. His strong short hair, carefully-trimmed whiskers, and thick eyebrows, were all of the same dark-grizzled hue; and his eyes, of a paler gray, were steady without being searching, with a kind of look in them of judicial authority—not unbecoming one who had spent the better part of his life in winnowing grains of truth out of sheaves of falsehood, and from whose decision there had seldom been appeal. His feet were large and clumsy; but his long hands were well-shaped, and the nails carefully trimmed though dark specks here and there betrayed the nature of his favourite pursuit.

Neither in face nor figure was there a single

point on which the eye of an artist or of a woman would have loved to linger; yet, in a crowd of strangers, you would probably have singled out George Anstruther as worthy of a second glance. You would have guessed that you looked upon a man whose strength lay rather in patient pertinacity, than in daring genius or passionate impulse—a man not easily moved by avarice or ambition, but yet who would seldom fail to work out his own end by his own means—a man self-respecting, if not entirely God-fearing; who might possibly be goaded or beguiled into the commission of some great crime, but scarcely into any action merely base or mean—a man who would pass safely through toils and temptations in which others would surely be entangled, and over whom the Lust of the Eye and the Pride of Life had as yet seldom prevailed.

It was a morning to make one forget the many sins of English spring. A light breeze from the north-west came, without a taint of smoke or miasma, straight, from green pasture-grounds, and pink orchards, and russet fallows. A morning that would have braced the nerves of a hypochondriac better than all the tonics of the faculty—a morning that might have tempted a would-be suicide to give the world another chance of making him amends for intolerable wrong.

Staid and sober as Anstruther was, he was by no means inaccessible to weather influences; and he was very happy, after his own fashion, as he paced to and fro, halting often to savour the fragrance of his trim parterres, with which mingled not unpleasantly the keener scent of the Manilla weed. He was no gambler, in the common sense of the word; for his stakes both at whist and piquet were invariably such as could scarcely have damaged the fortune of a much poorer man; but he felt success or defeat none the less keenly; and the fact of the previous night having been an exceptionally good one, may have contributed not a little to the pleasantness of his humour. The tenacity of his memory was something marvellous; and he could carry more than one whist-problem in his brain quite easily. He was working out rather a difficult case which had occurred on the previous night, and had just determined that his own and his partner's cards could not possibly have been played to more advantage, when his servant brought him out a note, saying that the bearer waited for an answer.

It was a dainty-looking missive. At the first glance Anstruther saw that it was a woman's; and the second told him whence it came. When he was alone, he sat down and opened the envelope deliberately, taking care not to destroy the intricate mono-

gram of violet and silver. Considering the brevity of the note, it took strangely long in perusal.

Therein, for the first time, Anstruther was made aware of Mrs. Ellerslie's matrimonial intentions; and further entreated, if he was not weary of doing her kindness, to take charge thenceforth of her separate interests, as her trustee.

"But it is so much easier to talk than to write about some things," Blanche concluded; "and if you would only name an hour that would suit you best for calling here, I would be quite sure to be at home to you, and to no one else."

Then she signed herself "affectionately," instead of "truly," as heretofore.

For a space that would have sufficed to get every word written on the two pages by heart, George Anstruther sat musing; and, as he mused, he toyed with the delicate note, passing it to and fro over his lips and nostrils, as though it had been a fresh may-blossom.

Mrs. Ellerslie's worst enemy would not have imputed to her such a vulgarism as using scented paper; and George Anstruther was little wont to give imagination the rein; nevertheless, he seemed to savour a suspicion of perfume. Other roses, besides those of Gueldres and Provence, have been known to impart fragrance to the meanest object

they brush with their petals—a fragrance the like of which exhales not from any herb or flower of earth, the like of which no cunning of chemistry can imitate—a fragrance that will endure after those same roses are withered and dead. As Anstruther mused, his bushy gray brows were drawn together, and the lines on his forehead grew deeper and deeper.

“Married again!” so his thoughts ran. “A risk surely for one of her stamp; she’s scarce likely to have her old luck over again. And to Mark Ramsay too!—There’s more than risk there. It’s the same man, of course, I heard so much of in India. He was not more than a twelvemonth out, and was keen enough after the big game; but he found leisure enough to do harm that could not be undone in a lifetime. Didn’t he come into a great fortune a year or so ago? Not that that would have anything to do with it: she has more than she wants already. Well, I’m not her guardian, or even a very old friend; so there’s no reason for my concerning myself with her future, beyond looking after settlements and investments. Of course, I’m always ready to do as much, for poor old Walter’s sake. I’ll write and tell her so, and call this afternoon. Congratulation-visits are not much in my line: I’d just as soon get this one over.”

When he had written a few lines in reply, the hour at which he was wont to betake himself to his laboratory was past: but he went out into the garden again; muttering, while he lighted a fresh cheroot:

"No use attempting to work; it's a broken day."

A forenoon passed in idleness, was not the only infraction of the methodical habits which had become ingrained in Anstruther's nature. He had long been accustomed to destroy every letter that he received so soon as it was answered; but Blanche's note, instead of finding its way to the waste-basket, was dropped into a drawer in the writing-table, the key of which was always turned. The circumstance was trifling in itself; yet a physiologist might have found ominous significance therein. When a clock, that for years has not varied a second, begins all at once, without any assigned reason, to indulge in ever so slight vagaries, it is a chance if any horologer will make it thenceforth keep quite correct time.

Whether Mrs. Ellerslie desired to show gratitude to her trusty counsellor for his past services, or whether she desired still further to secure his future fidelity, or whether she was prompted by the mischievous devil of coquetry that had been her familiar

so long—is a question not worth discussing. All these motives—the last for choice—may have influenced her that afternoon. La Reine Gaillarde was once heard to say, that Blanche would flirt with a baby in arms rather than not flirt at all; and truly her conduct on certain occasions—like the present one, for instance—made the imputation seem not unfounded. A more unpromising subject for captivation than George Anstruther could scarcely be imagined. She had long had great respect for his judgment, and confidence in his honour; and felt grateful to her late husband for having bequeathed to her so useful an ally. Nevertheless, she had always looked on him in a sort of professional light; and seldom thought of him except in connection with business of some kind. It was on business he came to speak now—ay, more than that—on business relating to her own second marriage.

Anstruther, to do him justice, after offering his brief good wishes, seemed disposed to keep the conversation on a correctly formal footing. It was not his fault that it assumed gradually a quasi-cousinly tone. It was not his fault if, whilst deeds were being consulted and vouchers verified, Mrs. Ellerslie, instead of sitting decorously at the table over against her adviser, chose to adopt a posture befitting a

a pupil of Gamaliel. Even that venerable rabbi might have found it hard to meet, quite unmoved, those confiding upward glances. George Anstruther was neither stock nor stone. He was originally, perhaps, not colder of constitution than his fellows; but the secluded life on which he entered at a very early age, added to a shy reserve increasing with his years, had kept him to a great extent clear of temptation: he was continent rather by force of habit than for conscience' sake. He had mixed so seldom in society, from youth upwards until now, that a woman's voice speaking low and sweetly was in his ears like the sound of some strange unearthly music; and he felt like one scanning the alphabet of an unknown language, as he looked down into Blanche Ellerslie's eyes.

Soon his thoughts began to wander from dry business details, and to dwell on such trifles as the fashion of a skirt or the hue of a trimming. He wondered whether any two colours on earth could blend so harmoniously as lilac and white, or were so fitting to be twined in bright brown hair. He was not unconscious of the growing weakness, and strove to shake it off with inward self-contempt; but it fared with him as with the victims of witchcraft in old time, who never could quite complete the cross-sign that would have set them free. And so the

weaving of the spell went on. He became so absent at last that Blanche noticed it.

"You have got quite tired over these dreadful papers. It's such a shame of me, to give you so much trouble. Shall we put them all away till another day?"

As she spoke she laid her fingers lightly on his wrist. If a spirit had touched him in his sleep, Anstruther could scarcely have started more violently.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "but I was really thinking of things concerning you, though not exactly of your settlements. I am not tired in the least, and these papers are very simple. I believe I quite understand what has to be done; and I don't know that I shall have to trouble you much more about this business."

"But you'll come again, and soon?" she said. "Do you never mean to visit me, except as my trustee?"

Before Anstruther could reply, the door opened slowly. The Brancepeths' butler was an elder of infinite discretion. Incapable of hurrying himself, he was not less indulgent to his superiors than to his inferiors, and far too discreet to make sudden irruptions on a *tête-à-tête*, howsoever innocent in outward seeming. He came now to inquire whether

it was Mrs. Ellerslie's pleasure to receive Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay had heard she was engaged, and would detain her for a few minutes only. The lady did not stir from where she sat; but glanced up at her companion, rather doubtfully.

"I meant this afternoon to be all yours, and I mean it still. If you don't mind my leaving you for a very little while, I'll go down and give Mark his audience. I shall be back before you have finished looking through my photograph-book."

Anstruther rose up hastily.

"Don't think of such a thing. You are only too kind; but I really must leave you, now that our business-talk is done. I had no idea how late it was; and I have one or two engagements that I cannot break."

She pouted a little, as if half loth to be gain-said.

"You know best, of course. I didn't mean to be exacting; but at least you'll see Mark before you go? I should not like to lose this opportunity of making you acquainted."

It would have needed a very keen observer to detect the shade of coldness and constraint in Anstruther's acquiescence; and the slight formality of manner afterwards, during the interchange of the

few courteous commonplaces with Ramsay, might be fairly set down to constitutional shyness.

"A quaint creature," Mark observed, as soon as the door had fairly closed behind Anstruther; "I have seen the very image of him in some old picture or another—ah, I remember now—it's the faithful steward in Hogarth's *Marriage à la mode*: only this one wears whiskers and no wig. I hope he'll never have reason to hold up his hands at our extravagance, Bianchetta."

"Don't laugh at him," she said gravely. "You would not, if you knew how thoroughly kind and useful he has always shown himself to me; though I never had the grace to thank him for it, properly, before to-day."

"I don't laugh at him. Lawyers who understand their business, and work without fees, are too rare to be lightly entreated. I would not have his manner thawed for the world. If it were a shade more genial, it would not suit a model trustee."

She shook her head reprovingly, smiling nevertheless; and, five minutes later, they were speaking of matters with which conveyancing had little enough to do.

Whatever were the engagements for that afternoon that George Anstruther could not break, he seemed to have forgotten them before he left Craven

Square far behind him. Instead of turning his steps towards either of his clubs, or towards any frequented thoroughfare, he walked slowly away northward, through the Regent's Park, to the gardens of the Botanical Society, of which he had been some time a fellow. The grounds were almost empty; and the solitary bench that he selected lay far out of the track of the few loungers who wandered hither and thither, mostly in pairs. Minutes passed into hours, and still Anstruther sat a-musing, haunted by the echo of a voice, by the shadow of a face, and, most of all, by the memory of a look—the look with which Blanche Ellerslie, before she spoke ever a word, had greeted Mark Ramsay.

The names of Hafiz and Firduzi are strange to many; but we all have heard or read of the eloquence of Eastern eyes. They gleam not less lustrously, be sure, on the banks of Indus or Ganges, than beside the waters of Shiraz. No man could have dwelt for a quarter of a century, with almost autocratic power, in a remote Indian district, without having chances enough of studying such language. Anstruther had seen eyes, compared with which Blanche Ellerslie's might seem dull, melting in entreaty, sparkling in provocation, and languishing sometimes in passion not wholly venal; but such a look as he had watched to-day—a look in which

there was none of the guile of coquette or courtesan, but only the frank confession of a woman's love—he had never seen before. He felt somewhat despondent, as he thought that he had spent two-thirds of the span of human life without ever winning such an one for himself; and that to dream of winning such an one now would be the very madness of vanity.

His reverie was not rose-coloured, yet it cost him a painful effort to break it. He forced himself back into the groove of his usual habits that evening; but the *chef* of the Planet failed for once to please his palate; and, in the first rubber that he played at the Orion, if his partner had not been one of those irrational loyalists who think that the King can do no wrong, exception might more than once have been taken to his play.

CHAPTER XI.

ON that same forenoon, one of the opening scenes in another drama was being enacted in another garden—the garden of Kensington, to wit. What a many secrets have been overheard by those ancient elms, since Heneage Finch built the boundary-fence of his pleasaunce! Could their experience be set forth for the behoof of modern lovers, would they be apt, I wonder, to encourage or to warn? If they said, “Forbear!” the word would be whispered very timidly, be sure, on such a morning as this.

In the Hamadryad there was ever a touch of human weakness, that the daughters of Oceanus would have spurned, and from which the Naiads and Oreads were free. She was not immortal, you know; her fragile life might any day be cut short by the woodman’s axe, withered by long unseasonable frosts, or blasted by cruel lightning. Some of the saddest and tenderest of ancient legends are those which tell of the sorrows of these poor nymphs, for whom no place was found on Olympus, and whom the greater gods seldom deigned to notice, unless it was to work them woe. So it was but natural that they should sympathise with the hopes

and fears of mortals; and that the favourite spots for love-trysts, since the trees budded in Eden, should have been found in forest land.

Mythology, in these practical days, is chiefly for the use of schools; and if any of those who loitered in Kensington Gardens that forenoon thought of such old-world fables, it was probably such an one as that sallow, gray-bearded man yonder—sitting apart and alone, seldom lifting his eyes from a dingy volume in antique binding—a bibliopole most likely, anxious to ascertain whether his purchase of yesterday was a veritable Elzevir or no. No such fancies, you might be sworn, crossed the brain of either of the pair with whom we are now concerned. Horace Kendall was first at the trysting-place, as in duty bound. In the pleasant shadowy nook where he sat, any idler would have been content to lounge an hour away without such special object as a meeting with Nina Marston. But, before ten minutes of solitary expectation were gone, Kendall evidently began to think himself ill-used, and a victim either of circumstances or caprice. His face—handsome enough in its own peculiar style—was something like a flashily-furnished room, that must be well lighted up to be attractive. Just now, with peevish fretfulness upon it, it was certainly rather the reverse of fascinating. He was chewing a second

cigarette rather viciously between his teeth, when he saw Nina Marston approaching.

Few people would have called Nina beautiful—she had not enough regularity of feature or brilliancy of complexion for such a distinction—but fewer still would have denied that she looked wonderfully piquante and pretty, sweeping over the grass with the rapid grace inherited from her Spanish ancestry; whilst stray gleams of sunlight flickered on the ripples of her rich black hair—scarcely concealed by the excuse for a bonnet matching her dress of misty blue. Even Kendall did her that much justice; and his brow cleared involuntarily as he rose to greet her, though his first words were querulous.

“I began to think you were never coming.”

“That is so like a man,” Nina answered—“a man who has nothing to do but to stroll out after breakfast, without any danger of being questioned about ‘whithers or wherefores.’ I’m sure a cigarette must be much pleasanter here than in a hot, stuffy room. I’m not a quarter of an hour late, after all; and you are as plaintive as if I had no danger and difficulties to fight with. Yes, dangers—you needn’t shrug your shoulders. It isn’t very likely that mamma will come down or want me before I get back—we weren’t home from the Broadlands till past four—and it isn’t very likely she’ll question

Rosie, as to whether I've been with her this morning or not; but she might do it, you know, and then—"

She pursed her firm scarlet lips significantly.

Kendall did not repent being unjust; but he had tact enough to see that to persist in sulking was scarcely wise. He laid his lips on the gloved hand that he held, with a grace that the girl thought perfect, though many women would have termed it theatrical.

"Cannot you guess what makes me exacting?" he murmured. "It is because the minutes I spend with you seem so short and few, and the hours I spend alone—I am always really alone when I don't see you—are so long and dreary; and yet I should be miserable, and hate myself for ever, if you got into trouble on my account to-day. I fear your sister would hardly help you out of the scrape."

"Never!" Nina replied decisively. "Rosie is the most good-natured thing alive, as a rule; but in this case she would not help me one bit. It was all I could do, on the morning after her ball, to prevent her putting mamma on her guard about you and me. I think it's partly on account of something Lord Nithsdale said—I do wish those grave elders would mind their own affairs—but it's not only that. She's got prejudices of her own, I'm certain."

His brow grew overcast again.

"Yes: it isn't likely that I shall ever have to

be grateful to Lady Nithsdale for her good offices, or her good word either. I suppose it isn't in her to be uncivil to anyone; but her manner grows colder every time we meet, and that's seldom enough, God knows. So you weren't home from the Broadlands till past four? How you must have enjoyed yourself! It was so pleasant for me to sit alone and fancy it all—who were your partners, and what they said; and how you listened, and smiled back at them; and all the rest of it.”

He shut his lips quickly; but scarce quick enough to prevent the escape of a base bitter word—such as must, indeed, grate on any woman's ears; unless, like the relatives of a certain literate, “she has grown steady under swearing.” The girl looked at him with a little pained surprise, but without a particle of fear. If Lord Daventry's daughter was to be ruled by terror, another manner of man than Horace Kendall must have swayed the iron sceptre.

“I wish very, very much that you could have been there,” she said simply; “and I didn't quite give you up till midnight; for I thought it just possible you might have got an invitation at the last moment. But when I saw that wishing was of no use, I tried to make the best of it; and I *did* enjoy myself after a fashion; I'm not a bit ashamed to confess it. You hardly expected me to sit sulking

in a corner, or to waltz with tears in my eyes? I'm sure I can't remember what my partners said. Much the same as usual, I suppose; but I can remember their names, I daresay. Hardly any of them are friends or enemies of yours."

There was not a shadow of taunt in those last words; yet they stung him not the less sharply.

"That's very likely," he sneered. "All in your sister's set, I suppose—a very nice set, too. They live in a sort of Agapemone of their own, and don't think an outsider worth nodding to. They are the very partners I should have chosen for you, of course, if I had had to choose."

Gwendoline Marston was not by any means a well-read young lady; and *Spiritual Wives* had not then been written. The long Greek word fairly puzzled her.

"I haven't an idea what you mean by Agasomething-or-other; something very severe, no doubt. I suppose I'm an outsider, too; for very few of Rosie's set ever notice me much—unless it's Regy Avenel, who gives me a turn sometimes for old acquaintance' sake. You needn't be captious about my partners. Wait till I risk for any one of them one quarter as much as I have risked for you this morning—something more than a scolding, as you know. But I didn't come out here to quarrel. Look pleasant this moment, or I'll carry back what I've

brought for you. Cross-grained people don't deserve anything half so pretty."

She opened a small case, holding a sort of armlet, like an Indian bangle; only the band of dead gold was flatter and broader, and it was closed with a spring-lock. On the outside, in bright raised Roman letters, was the word "Nina;" and within was engraved a date—the date of the Nithsdale ball.

"I arrest you in the Queen's name," she said, laughing delightedly at his look of surprise, "and resistance is useless; so sit still and be handcuffed."

As she spoke, she fitted the band round his arm, and closed the spring-lock with a snap. It was not so tight as to be galling, yet not loose enough to slip below the wrist-joint; so that under any ordinary circumstances the sleeve would hide it.

Very wise or very morose he must surely be, who is not mollified by a present offered timorously by fair white hands. Men who would put aside such a thing, coming from one of their fellows, as though it savoured of bribe, would no more reject the first proof of a woman's generosity than they would stay the dropping of the summer-dew; and might be inclined to doubt whether it is always more blessed to give than to receive. The consciousness that the natural order of things is for this once reversed, does not make the situation less

pleasant. When Solomon sat in his glory, and peace-offerings were laid at his feet from Ophir, and Arabia, and the Isles of the Sea, I doubt if the richest of them all found such favour in his solemn eyes as the meanest gift of the dusky Sabæan beauty. Kendall was neither a sage nor a stoic, nor at any time hampered by over-much delicacy. His ill-humour vanished instantly. He would possibly have preferred a trinket that he could have flaunted more ostentatiously—the plebeian drop in his blood showed itself in nothing more than in a garish taste in personal adornment—nevertheless, he was much gratified, and so eloquent in his thanks, that Nina was fain to check them.

“It isn’t worth speaking about,” she said, with a bright blush; “but I’m so glad you like it, and that you should like the fancy, too. Whenever you get tired of it, you must come to me to take it off; for it can’t be opened without the key, which I mean to keep.”

Not worth speaking about? Perhaps few women, unspoiled by the world, think any homage paid to their first *suzerain d’amour* worth a second thought, much less a second word. Yet there are men, not especially high-souled or unselfish, who would have owned to a certain swelling of the heart, had they guessed with what infinite difficulty and risk Nina Marston had contrived to order that armlet; and at

what cost, not only of self-denial, but of self-abasement, she had contrived to beg and borrow and save coin enough to pay for it. If Horace Kendall had been aware of these details, he would only have smiled; and the smile would have been half-contemptuous of the girl's folly, half-exultant over his own irresistible charms.

For a minute or two they sat hand in hand, quite silent; then Nina glanced at her watch, and rose up quickly.

"I must go now. Don't try to keep me; I feel it isn't safe. It's always bad luck, to go against presentiments. You may walk with me to the gate if you like, but you mustn't come outside. I don't want to scandalise my respectable old cabman. It was so nice of him, to bring me here all through bye-streets, just as if he guessed what I wished; and not to look in the least knowing, when I told him to wait here. I only hope he'll be as discreet in taking me back."

Kendall had studied his part of *jeune premier* very carefully; he thought it was his cue here to look mildly reproachful, and to heave a little injured sigh; but he did not attempt to detain his companion either by word or gesture, and the two walked away together.

"I shall see you again soon—very soon?" Horace asked, when they were nearing the gate.

"I'm sure I hope so," she said rather drearily. "Every day it seems more difficult to manage. We go to the Opera, to-night, of course; and to-morrow there's a great dinner at home, and a crowd coming in the evening. On Saturday there's a hateful garden-party of the Chetwynds' at Twickenham. I do so wish it would rain, and spoil those horse-chestnuts they make such a fuss about. I don't see a chance of our meeting, unless it's in the crush-room to-night; and then you mustn't talk to me for more than a second or two."

His face lowered again; and he looked at her askance from under his bent brows.

"I have always heard that where there's a will there's a way. The proverb don't seem to apply in our case. I suppose we shall not meet again, till someone of your acquaintance gives a music-party at which I'm wanted. I have a great mind to go in for the regular professional game. Then, perhaps, Lady Daventry wouldn't mind my giving you some singing-lessons; my terms wouldn't be exorbitant, and your voice is worth taking some pains about."

There was sorrowful wonder in her great black eyes, but no anger or upbraiding. Considering her quick, wilful temper, the patience with which she met each fresh proof of his peevish ingratitude was something miraculous.

"I don't deserve that," she said. "Never mind: I'll forget it as soon as I can; but I wish you wouldn't say things that it hurts one to remember. It isn't my fault, surely, that Lady Longfield has been crossed off our visiting-list, so that there's no chance of her bringing you to-morrow evening. I don't think mamma had any special reason for doing it—she's too indolent to quarrel with anyone—but she's rather a knack of dropping her acquaintances. Did you ever hear of a girl, in her first season, teasing people for invitations for a man—neither her cousin, nor a very old friend? If you won't trust me, I can't help it. It will only make more uphill work for us both."

Kendall had the tact to see that for once he had touched the wrong chord, and pressed it too long: so he drew the contrition-stop at once. The first few words brought the light back into Nina Marston's face; and, after the usual promises to write and so forth, they parted amicably.

Horace Kendall's meditations seemed somewhat chequered in their kind; for, if he frowned twice or thrice as he walked back across the park, his lips wore an insolent smile as he halted in a solitary spot, and, drawing back his sleeve, let the armlet shimmer in the sun.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN the news of Mrs. Ellerslie's engagement was announced, there was in the world not a little wonder; and much diversity of opinion as to the chances of its turning out happily. The prophets of evil were to the prophets of good as it were ten to one: yet few of these were influenced by rancour, or anything beyond the purposeless spite of the hack-gossip, who is bound to be cynical, if not scandalous.

The animosities that Blanche Ellerslie had provoked were all feminine, and not very bitter or enduring. Indeed, many who had watched jealously the going-out and coming-in of the dangerous little cruiser, were not ill-disposed to wish her "God-speed," now that she was to sail no longer under her own flag; and so could have less excuse than ever for molesting the stately caravels forging onwards towards nuptial roadsteads and havens.

No man could follow such a career as Ramsay's had been for years past, without laying foundation for more than one mortal feud: but, if Mark could not speak of his enemies in the words of the old

Spanish statesman who has just passed away—*Ils sont tous fusillés*—he could comfort himself with the assurance that none of them was just now to the fore to witness against his past, or augur maliciously of his future. It should be remembered, that since the early meridian of life he had lived so much abroad, that the untravelled part of English society scarcely knew him, except by hearsay.

On neither side were there any of those ill-used friends, whose querulous voices mar the harmony of epithalamia. In the early and middle days of her widowhood, Blanche had not lacked suitors; but of late her disinclination to marry again had become such an established fact, that no one had cared to incur an almost certain rejection, which might bring a restraint on the pleasant freedom of Platonic straying. Others, besides Harry Armar, had carried away from her presence the sting of her coquetry, and had striven more or less effectually to deaden it by one or other anodyne. But, of all that had known her intimately, Oswald Gauntlet was perhaps the only one who had never quite ceased to think of her in the light of his possible wife.

Since Mark Ramsay's name was first quoted in the marriage-market, his demeanour had been so carefully guarded, and his courtesy so justly apportioned, that no *chaperone*, howsoever exacting or

sanguine, could complain of his having trifled with the affections of their charges.

If on the present occasion there was not much of envy or uncharitableness, doubt, and infinite curiosity, were expressed as to the result of the match. It could not exactly be called an ill-assorted one; for the several ages of the two affianced were suitable enough; and they might be supposed to possess a certain similarity of tastes. Nevertheless, their contract seemed to rouse in the world a kind of buzz of expectation—such as pervades the gallery when two renowned *écarté*-players face each other. If any of these whispers reached, as is not likely, the ears of the parties chiefly concerned, neither surely bestowed on them a second thought; for Mark had walked too long after his own devices to care a straw for the world's wisdom when it criticised his private concerns; and, though Blanche had hesitated, as you are aware, before taking the final step, all the preachers in Christendom would not have persuaded her to repent it when once taken.

Everything was soon ready for the marriage. Even legal charioteers have no excuse for driving heavily when their well-oiled wheels meet with no impediment; and it is known with what a will milliners will work for a favourite customer, in whose order there is the ring of ready gold. If any had

been disposed to question Mrs. Ellerslie's popularity, they would have been compelled to acknowledge it after reviewing her wedding-presents. This was not a case of contract between financial or social magnates, where the gifts, as a matter of course, are gorgeous and numberless. Very few of Blanche's intimates could really afford to be generous; yet day by day offerings came pouring in, till Laura Brancepeth's back drawing-room became all ablaze with *bijouterie*. Amongst these there was a gift that attracted much attention; though several that lay around were much richer in appearance, if not in intrinsic value—a fire-opal of great size and brilliancy, set in the midst of a square amulet of the soft pale gold worked only by Eastern jewellers. Round the upper edge ran an intricate mixture of dots and curves, that ninety-nine out of a hundred would have mistaken for a pattern in arabesque. A very accurate observer might have noticed that the graving of the signs was of later date than the ornament itself.

This was Mr. Anstruther's present, and he brought it himself. He had written to Blanche several times about her business-matters, which he managed with his usual skill and earnestness; but had never shown in Craven Square since the day you wot of. On the present occasion his manner

was stiff almost to ungraciousness; and, if Blanche had not been taken up in admiring the amulet—for the quaintness of the design, even more than the beauty of the gem, captivated her fancy—she must have noticed this at once. And when she thanked him, not only for his pretty present, but also for the trouble he had taken on her behalf, he answered quite chillingly.

“I cannot accept thanks that I have not earned—at least, from you. A little business is quite a godsend to a perfectly idle man who has worked in his time; and the little I have done for you I would have done twenty times over, unasked, to please Walter Ellerslie. And he did ask me, in the last letter I ever had from him, to serve you whenever I could. If I have carried out his wishes, I am glad; but I can claim little gratitude from you, you see, any more than I can for devising that trinket, which I got—honestly, I assure you—years and years ago. The change I made in it—it’s hardly worth naming—was only adding these letters.”

He traced with his finger the inscription round the edge.

She was surprised, and a little hurt, at the change in his demeanour. He seemed so bent on ignoring entirely their last interview—so determined to make her feel, that familiar confidences, between

a grave personage like himself and a light-minded bird like her, were misplaced; and that for her own sake she was not worth looking after. Nevertheless, she felt somehow that no real unkindness was meant, and deemed it best to let it pass for the present.

"Those letters?" she said; "I had no idea they were letters. And what do they spell?—some terrible cabalistic word, I daresay."

"No; a very plain and simple one, whether it is written in English or Sanscrit—the word is 'Ready.' I had it engraved there, because I wished you to be reminded sometimes that though the trust, if you can call it so, that Walter Ellerslie left me ends on your marriage-day, I am always ready with any help that I can render. If I had ever been romantic, Mrs. Ellerslie, I should have outlived that long ago. I mean literally what I say; and I shall not go back from my word if we don't chance to meet for years after next Wednesday—not a very unlikely thing either—and the service I refer to has nothing to do with the duties of a marriage-trustee."

"I will not forget," she said softly; "but, if I ever ask you for help, it will be in my own name—not even in that of the kind, brave soul who trusted me to you—and then I may thank you for myself, and in my own fashion. But I cannot understand what you mean by its being likely that

we should not meet. Wherever I am, you know you will always be welcome; and I'm certain you will like Mark when you become better acquainted."

Was she so sure of that? Little as she was to be trusted when trifling, Mrs. Ellerslie was seldom insincere. She felt a disagreeable consciousness just now, that those last words might just as well have been left unsaid; and that George Anstruther deserved something better than a hollow form of courtesy. Possibly some such thought may have crossed his mind likewise. If his manner had thawed a little, it froze now more rigidly than ever.

"You're very kind. I'm not likely to be troublesome to you; and I fear I've little chance of improving my acquaintance with Mr. Ramsay. I never mix in general society, as perhaps you have heard, and my bad habits are past mending. When I accepted your invitation for Wednesday next, I accepted only for the church, you remember."

With all her tact in such matters, Blanche felt at a loss how to break the awkward pause that ensued. She had always considered Mr. Anstruther very abrupt and eccentric; but his manner now fairly puzzled her. That he still meant kindly by her was clear; but then, what signified the harsh coldness for which she had given no sort of fresh cause? Whilst she was in this state of perplexity, the door

opened, infinitely to her relief, and Laura Brancepeth entered—from whose presence, so soon as he could decently escape, Mr. Anstruther made precipitate retreat. Lady Peverell herself—hating La Reine Gaillarde as only Puritans can hate—was fain to attribute to her some slight good-nature and generosity; but the warmest of her admirers scarcely gave that reckless dame credit for so much delicacy, as she had evinced since the engagement had become an accomplished fact. Her one object seemed to be, to make Blanche forget all that she had said whilst warning was of avail; and she would not hear of the wedding-breakfast taking place elsewhere than in Craven Square—devoting to the celebration of that select banquet more time and zeal than she had ever spared to the most important of her own entertainments. She was not fickle, either in her likes or dislikes. At first it was rather a trial to be always cordial to Mark Ramsay, and she had to set a watch on her free-spoken lips, lest a sharp word should escape them unawares. But this restraint soon passed away. She could not deny that Mark's demeanour towards his *fiancée* was simply perfect; and, as, day by day, she came to acknowledge that report had not exaggerated the fascination of his manner, she ceased to wonder at Blanche's infatuation, or even to call her choice by such a name.

"Devils are not often quite so black as they are painted," she confessed, "and this one's complexion certainly improves on acquaintance. I don't feel the least inclined to exorcise him now when he appears; and I have quite left off pitying Blanche; though I don't think it's likely I shall ever quite come to envy her. There's room for improvement, of course; but I'm not sure that's a bad thing. Mr. Brancepeth is never so happy, as when he's 'improving' some piece of land or another; and Blanche can try her hand in the same line. Perhaps she will get some good crops out of her new property after all, if she's any luck in husbandry."

Her confidant—*vieux routier* himself—smiled approvingly.

"Metaphorical as usual," he said. "I don't suppose anyone else would have got Satanic and agricultural similes into the same sentence. But your charity covers even such a sin, as that very old joke about husbandry. I do hope things will turn out better than the wiseacres would have it. It's such a comfort to see the talent wrong sometimes."

When Blanche Ellerslie lay down to rest on the eve of her second wedding-day, she could not help comparing her sensations with what she had felt at a similar season once before. Though she was very young then, she had tasted, in all innocence, of the fruit of the Tree of knowledge of

good and evil; and she was not much overcome by the vague terrors that beset guileless maidenhood, just about to cross the frontier of an unknown land. Left motherless in her childhood, she had managed a household at an age when most girls are still in school trammels. General Norman, when off duty, was too busy with his own pursuits to keep strict watch and ward over the proceedings of his charming daughter. He was only too glad to see her amusing herself in her own way; and, though he told his friends in confidence sometimes that "such an arrant little flirt never breathed," he said it rather pleasantly than complainingly; and never dreamed of the possibility of her coming to harm.

The father, though not very wise in his generation, was right so far. Blanche, before she was far advanced in her teens, was well able to defend her own heart. Love-whispers not a few had been poured into her ears, before Walter Ellerslie's deep grave tones made the offer of marriage; but she had never been hampered by a serious attachment, or even by a fancy that survived a week; neither had she any repugnance to overcome. Perhaps she would have preferred a husband whose

locks were like the raven's,
Whose bonnie brow was brent.

But this was a mere matter of taste not worth insisting on; and she felt somehow that she would be

safer, and happier, and freer to boot, in the long-run, under the guardianship of the stiff, stern soldier, than under that of the gay gallants whose lissom knees would bend each night before a fresh beauty. She fully intended to make Colonel Ellerslie's home bright and cheery; and that resolve she worked out to the letter, after her own fashion. At least he thought so who ought to have known best, and said so when he lay a-dying.

She had sat on her first husband's knee, and played with his sword-hilt, when she was quite a child; he gave her the first ornament she ever wore—a waist-belt of regimental gold-lace—and she had got so thoroughly used to him, that, on the eve of the day when she was to take his name, she hardly felt as if she were going to enter a strange home. It was very different with her now. She had known Mark Ramsay scarcely four months; and there was no reason why she should feel safe in trusting herself implicitly to his mercy: indeed, now that she was about so to trust herself, there were less grounds, as she knew full well, for confidence than for fear.

To his mercy. That was the only true way of putting it. That she had firm and fast hold on his affection now she could not doubt; but, if that hold were ever to be loosened, or cast off altogether, she felt she would have nothing else to cling to in

this life, or—if truth must be written—in the next. Blanche was not absolutely a heathen; but she had never been taught to say a prayer except by rote, and hers was but a lip-religion at the best. Her perishable wealth, such as it was, was all locked up in treasure-houses that, if they keep out the robber, cannot for long keep out the canker-worm. She had made a plaything of love till now; suddenly the laughing child had waxed into a giant's stature, and stood before her—dark-browed, armed, menacing. Into the fair house so long tenantless, though swept and garnished, a strong spirit had entered; what manner of spirit it was, could be proven in the future only. She felt somewhat like a gamester who, having always till now played for the merest trifle, finds himself lured on to deeper and deeper stakes; till at last all his fortune is set upon one cast—a cast yet to be thrown.

Pondering on these things, it is no wonder if Blanche Ellerslie's heart fluttered strangely; but she never repented for an instant, or wished the morrow deferred; and the tremor only gave a keener zest to the delight of anticipated happiness. She would not have set the shadow of the next morning's sun one hair's-breadth back on the dial. A smile lingered on her lips long after her eyes were closed; and, if her sleep was not dreamless that night, it was haunted by no visions of warning.

CHAPTER XIII.

FEW men, if they told truth, would not own to having experienced some curious sensations, when they came to realise that, with another round of the clock, the thread of their bachelor life must be cut in twain.

It is not a very terrible death, certainly. The Wielder of the shears wears a fair white robe, all be-ribboned and purple-fringed; and over her features there falls the brightest of saffron veils; but, mask it as gaily as she will, we know it is Atropos, and none other, that cometh in the morning. Even the impetuous lover—who, for the last month past, has quarrelled with the tardiness of time—may, without treason, at such an hour indulge in two or three retrospective sighs. These last hours are spent differently, of course—often very differently from what one would expect from previous knowledge of the person—but I think they are not often spent alone.

Not long ago, a man, who has since turned out a perfect prize-husband, was found, late on the eve of his wedding-day, wandering through the groves of Cremorne. He was no roistering Alsatian; the place had never been a favourite haunt of his; and I dare swear there was not a single wish or regret

then in his honest heart that his bride might not have known and approved. When put upon his defence there and then by certain acquaintances, who pretended to be scandalised at lighting on him there, his sole excuse was, that it was too hot for any smoking-room, and he came there for company. It was the simple truth, I have no doubt. He had less reason, perhaps, than most people to dread being left alone with his own thoughts; but he preferred any society to theirs just then.

Mark Ramsay was not given to sentimentalise, and—troubling himself not a whit about the past—was nearly a fatalist as to the future. He had a presentiment, as has been hinted before, that retributive justice, in one shape or other, would lay hands on him some day; but he felt no awe of the distant shadow. Whether the sword over his head swung by a steel wire, or a silken thread, he cared not to inquire; and fully meant to take his ease after his own fashion till the blow should fall. He was no surface Sybarite: his thoughts were so thoroughly drilled, that, if he could not always regulate their flow, he could at least draw them out of any disagreeable channel; so that they were scarce likely to give him much trouble now. Nevertheless, he had been careful to provide against solitude on the last evening of his bachelorhood; and another beside himself heard the clocks chime midnight in

those same chambers, where his musing-fit after the Nithsdale ball had ended with the words, "I will."

Mark Ramsay had a very large acquaintance; and, in despite of his misdemeanors, was rather popular than otherwise in general society; but if he had lived from youth upwards the life of a recluse he could not have had fewer intimates. Such a term certainly would not apply to his present companion; though, since he first knew Vere Alsager, he had been much in his company, and each could have told curious tales of the other, had they been given to babbling.

Some people thought Alsager's face singularly handsome. Picturesque it certainly was—with its keen aquiline contour, set off by a blue-black beard, whose massive lustrous waves might have made an Osmanli envious. His deep-set eyes were quiet enough as a rule; but now and then there came into them rather a truculent look, after seeing which once, you ceased to wonder at the man's story. It was a simple, and not a very uncommon one. He was bred to diplomacy; and was on the fair road to advancement, when an unlucky accident—as his friends called it, though the world in general gave it a harsher name—turned him adrift without a career. Half-a-dozen different versions of this were given at the time; none of which perhaps were ab-

solutely correct. No one believed that the first cause of offence arose out of the difference of opinion at the Casino; or that Agnello Salviati, the sweetest-tempered of voluptuaries, would have made a few careless words, dropped by the other, the pretext of a mortal quarrel. One thing was certain—that Alsager might easily have avoided the unhappy issue, had he been so minded, without impeachment of his honour. This told heavily against him. There was a rumour, too, more generally believed than disbelieved, of a woman, thickly cloaked and veiled, who visited him late that night; and of agonised entreaty and bitter wailing, overheard by some who lodged under the same roof; and people would have it that other reasons, besides natural grief for her only brother, drove Maddalena Salviati soon afterwards into the shelter of the cloister. If it was she who came to plead, that night, for herself or another, she might have spared herself the trouble and the shame. There was no more compassion in Vere Alsager's eyes, than if he were there to avenge a wrong, when he took his place next morning for the barrier-duel; and his hand was steady enough to send a bullet through his adversary's lungs, before the forty paces betwixt them were shortened by three.

Looking at it in its most favourable light, it

was a very ugly story—so ugly that all the family interest, used unsparingly in the delinquent's behalf, could make no head against it. The chief of the Foreign Office in those days was no purist; but his bitterest political foes avouched him a high-minded gentleman; and the black cross, set by him over against Vere Alsager's name, none of his successors was tempted to erase. It was years and years ago when all this happened; and Alsager—who since then had lived a quiet *dilettante* sort of life, addicting himself chiefly to painting, wherein he had acquired no mean skill, and giving no further grave cause for scandal—had been gradually taken back into the world's good graces; till now he was not in much worse repute than many of whom it is vaguely whispered "that they have been a little wild in their youth." His own memory was not quite so accommodating. He never thought of that night—and he thought of it often—without intense bitterness: the bitterness of an eager, ambitious man, by whose own act and deed a promising career has been marred; with which mingled, perhaps, certain drops of remorse. But then, you see, he knew all the rights of the story; wherein he had the advantage of any living. Even Mark Ramsay, who paced out the ground from the barrier, and measured to a grain the charge of the fatal pistol, was only

partially taken into his principal's confidence at the time; and since then, by tacit consent, the subject had been ignored betwixt them.

All the circumstances considered, one might have thought that Ramsay, lacking a groomsman, would have chosen some other than Alsager. The parallel of one good turn deserving another, would scarcely apply here. Yet both seemed to think the arrangement perfectly natural: when Vere said, "Of course, I shall be very happy," the other thoroughly understood the meaning of his smile. And so it was settled.

It was characteristic of the two men, that, though they had dined and spent all the evening together, neither had made the faintest allusion to the event of the morrow. They had analysed the racing of the past week; and the chances of certain of their fellows surviving the next great meeting—for plunging was much affected by the set to which they both belonged—decided that the great Ethiopian Opera was a delusion and a snare; and that its *impresario*, through age and overfeeding, had become incapable of judging whether voices were cracked or legs crooked—discussed the latest alliances, legal or illegal, of their mutual acquaintances: but of Mark's marriage not one word.

"Perfect chambers, certainly," Alsager remarked

after a long pause, making a blue smoke-wreath curl round the bronze torso of a dancing faun; "quite ornamental enough, and not overdone. I hate, when I'm sitting in a man's room, to be always reminded of a boudoir in the Quartier Breda."

"Yes. Clinton had very chaste notions of furnishing," the other assented, "which is odd enough, remembering what his other tastes were. I took this place off his hands just as it stood, when he was obliged to make a moonlight flitting. There was no valuation; and I gave him his own price without chaffering; but I fancy I got a real bargain. Nothing you see is really mine, so far as choice goes, except a few pictures and statuettes; and I haven't been long enough here to feel thoroughly domesticated; so there's no great reason why I should be plaintive about changing my quarters."

A low incredulous laugh stirred the black waves of Alsager's beard.

"You're improving," he said. "Till now, I never guessed that you would undervalue a pretty thing because another man owned it; or that you could not be comfortable unless you felt thoroughly domesticated. *Macte novâ virtute.* The will-o'-the-wisp will be a steady, shining light, before all's done. What do you mean to do about these chambers—to let someone else have them, all standing? That's

the simplest way. I wish I could afford to take them, I know."

"I've hardly made up my mind," Mark answered. "I'm in no particular hurry about it. There's nothing here I should care to move all the way to Scotland; and I sha'n't look out for a town-house till next spring. I'll tell you what, Vere; you may live here till then, if you like—rent-free, of course. It's no favour. I'd infinitely sooner leave my things in your charge, than at the old housekeeper's mercy. Will you come?"

"I should like it of all things," the other said; "though, if it isn't a favour, I've very vague ideas of benevolence. The worst of it is, one would never be able to go back and settle down in dingy lodgings again. Never mind. Unto the day, the day. I accept all the same. I'm very disinterested, you see; for I can't understand why you don't clear out at once. You could easily put your nicknacks in safe-keeping somewhere; and it's so utterly impossible that you could ever use these chambers again."

"Highly improbable, certainly; but—as for impossible, it's a very big word; too big for my dictionary, I know."

They looked at each other; and Alsager smiled again.

"Ah, I understand. A wise general always provides for retreat. Your provisions are made in good time. Mark—the devil's in it, if we two can't speak frankly—you'll own, it is a leap in the dark you are taking, after all?"

"Very much in the dark," the other answered coolly. "But the landing is likely to be as safe, or more so, than in most of the jumps that we have taken with our eyes open. One thing I am certain of—if I'm not comfortable it will be my own fault or misfortune; and so you'll see, when you come to know Blanche better. There are dozens of women all round us prettier, and wittier, and better than she is, I daresay; but she is simply the most sociable creature I ever met with; her voice and manner, let alone her face, grow on you quite curiously."

"I never doubted Mrs. Ellerslie's attractions," Alsager said, "and I daresay you could not have made a luckier choice. What I did doubt was—whether you should have chosen at all. But we're creatures of circumstance much more than of habit, I do believe; and, perhaps, if anyone left me a big property and a big house, I should begin to feel matrimonial immediately, as a matter of course. It isn't likely such a good part will ever be cast to me: but, I confess, I look forward to seeing *you* play the Head of the Family."

"Mind you do come and see it, then," Ramsay retorted. "There's no disease in the Kenlis moors so far, I hear: they are only overstocked, and want shooting down. I shall reckon on you early in August, mind."

He stretched himself as he spoke, pitching the end of his cigar away. The other took the hint, and rose.

"Yes; it's full time we went to bed. It's no question of steadiness of eye and hand to-morrow; but the breakfast is an awful trial of nerve: I'm not afraid of the church work."

"Very brave of you, I must say. Now I think it's just as well, for your sake, there's no sprinkling of holy water, in our marriage-service, over the assistants; there's no knowing what the effect might be. Good-night: mind you're ready when I call for you."

"The assistants," Vere Alsager thought within himself as he strode away. "And how about the principals? *They* have no need to shrink from holy water, of course—particularly St. Mark yonder. I've done some queerish things in my time: but, if his past were weighed against mine, I know which side would kick the beam. It's kind of him, too, to lend me these chambers; though I question if it's quite disinterested kindness. Bah! I'm always question-

ing; and what's the use of it? Perhaps it will be longer than next spring before he wants to make use of his *petite maison*; perhaps he never had the idea, after all. I like what I have seen of her. Those dainty, delicate women are piquant long after they cease to be pretty; and hers is a face that will last! I shouldn't mind painting it. I'll book Kenlis for August, at all events: it won't be half a bad place to stay at, as long as things go on smoothly."

CHAPTER XIV.

DID you ever chance to read *Firmilian*—the completest literary mystification of modern times? You may be sure, it has not been forgotten yet by the ill-used critics who sat in judgment on its merits and demerits, wagging their heads over its spasmodic vagaries—though some, tempering judgment with mercy, held out hope of amendment to the hot-brained offender, if he would but profit by their monitions—and who found out, when it was too late, that they had but fed the laughter of the veteran humorist, who, having spread the net, never stirred tongue nor finger till the grave Palladian birds were fluttering in the meshes.

Truly, the mock-tragedy deserves to be remembered on other grounds besides these. After all, the spasmodic element was not much more glaringly developed than in parts of *Festus*, and others of the same school; and many dramas, worked out in sober earnest, and profusely sprinkled with the midnight oil, lack the rhythm and power of the pasquinade penned for pastime in the summer forenoons at Speyside.

There is great pomp and festival in the church of St. Nicholas. The sun streams full and fair through the gorgeous window; sweetly and slowly rises and falls the chant of the trained voices—

There rolls the organ anthem down the aisle,
And thousand voices join in its acclaim.
All they are happy—they are on their knees;
Round and above them stare the images
Of antique saints and martyrs; the censers steam
With their Arabian charge of frankincense;
And every heart, with inward fingers, counts
The blissful rosary of pious prayer.

It is very still and dark in the vaults below, where the powder-barrels are stored, and where waits the busy mocker, holding the slow match that will anon send the souls of all those good worshippers above flitting hither and thither. After a while comes the last triumphant antiphon—

Nicholai, sacerdotum
Decus, honor, gloria;
Plebem omnem, clerum totum—

And then—

[The cathedral is blown up.]

Not long ago, I heard a man confess—he was not given to quaint fancies, nor specially sardonic or sombre of temperament—that he never listened to a marriage-service without thinking of that same cathedral scene. His experience of life, it appeared, had forced him to believe that, under the feet of most couples standing face to face before the altar,

there is stored up more or less of combustible elements, the firing of which is merely a question of time; though the explosion may be long deferred, and, when it occurs, may be attended with nothing more harmful than a little noise and smoke.

But even this foreboder of evil would have been puzzled to discover anything very threatening in the aspect of things, if he had been present on the morning when Mark Ramsay took Blanche Ellerslie to be his wedded wife. Though neither the bride nor the bridegroom had turned the corner of middle life, they were quite old enough to know their own minds; and neither was likely to make a false step through impulse or from rashness. If there was little likelihood of intense devotion on either side, there was fair promise of the pleasant companionship which unites people endowed with similar tastes and facilities for indulging the same.

Against this were to be set, of course, Ramsay's antecedents, which certainly were the reverse of encouraging: but he had been more than twelve months, as it were, on his probation; and, so far as the world knew, had shown no signs of relapse. Society in general was disposed to give him credit for having turned over a new leaf. If he had not intended henceforth to do all things decently and in order, there was no earthly reason why he should have

hampered himself with a wife or a regular establishment. Kenlis Castle was a fine place, to be sure; but there were others quite as majestic on either side of the border, the honours of which were done by bachelors in bachelor-fashion—in the most liberal sense of the word. Mark's was one of the exceptional faces that never look weather-beaten, after a youth ever so stormy; and anyone, seeing him that morning for the first time, would have found it hard to believe that half the stories told of him could be true.

It was meant to be a quiet wedding, and the invitation list was purposely limited; but the concourse of spectators, larger than was common in that fashionable church, proved that others besides the intimate acquaintance of the contracting parties were curious to witness their espousal. Several of the wedding-party, to whom seats were allotted in the pews nearest the altar, may have felt like the Pope at Paris, when he said that "the greatest wonder of the town was to see *him* there." But not one of them seemed so thoroughly out of place as Mr. Anstruther.

The colour and fashion of his garments—more funereal than festive—would not have been so remarkable; for Anglo-Indian attire is apt to be eccentric, especially when the wearer is not on speaking

terms with his tailor: but the settled gloom of the man's countenance was not so easily to be accounted for; and the nervous discomfort of his manner could hardly be attributed to mere lack of familiarity with the forms and ceremonies of the Church as by law established. In his eyes—usually so hard and cold—there was a haggard look not pleasant to meet. Perhaps he was vaguely conscious of this; for, during the delay before the service commenced, and throughout it, except when he was compelled to stand up with the rest, he kept his face always shaded with his bony hand.

Yet, when Blanche Ramsay turned away from the altar and descended the steps, leaning on her husband's arm, it so chanced that the first glance that met hers, as she raised her eyes rather shyly, was George Anstruther's. His tall lanky figure could scarcely fail to be prominent anywhere; and he stood close to the aisle. A superstitious person might have taken the omen somewhat to heart; and Blanche—who believed in the *jettatura* no more than she did in second-sight—was half inclined to regret she had so pressingly insisted on the presence of this especial wedding-guest. She never suspected, for a moment, that anyone there present could take more than a friendly interest in the ceremony just concluded; and—as for any malice or uncharitable-

ness being stirred in the breast of so staid a personage as George Anstruther—she was just as likely to impute such emotions to Mr. Brancepeth, who gave her away. If she had been forced to answer the question of Oswald Gauntlet's searching eyes, she might possibly have felt rather timid, and just the least bit remorseful. But he would never have glared at her in that uncanny fashion.

Men, out of Bedlam, or off the stage, very seldom do glare nowadays. Those whom she has jilted most cruelly, instead of confronting the bride at the church-door, in the antique ballad fashion, bow their heads meekly and courteously as she passes out—even if they do not hum under their breaths Béranger's gay wicked refrain:

Un doux espoir
Me sourit encore
De la couronne de la mariée.

Nevertheless, the glimpse of that face did affect Blanche Ramsay with a faint presentiment of ill-luck; and she shivered ever so slightly—even as Horace's fair mistress may have done, when, stepping daintily towards her litter, she caught sight of the snake

Qui, per obliquum similis sagittæ,
Terruit mannos.

The wedding procession had scarcely passed down the aisle, when Mr. Anstruther began to make

his way out of the church, muttering some excuse to his nearest neighbour about the heat. It was an odd pretext for him to choose, who had lived so long where 90° in the shade was the normal state of the thermometer; and who had often, in old times, stirred the ire of portly *baboos* by looking comfortably cool in an atmosphere that caused them to pant and perspire. Yet it was not, perhaps, altogether a false one; for there was a dark flush round either cheekbone; and, if you had touched his hand as he dragged off his gloves impatiently, you would have thought there was fever in his veins. But no one in the crowd through which he elbowed his way noticed anything strange in his demeanour; and the idlers outside never turned their heads to watch the gaunt ungainly figure, hurrying away with long uneven strides through the glaring sunlight.

The breakfast in Craven Square was not nearly so dreary as such entertainments are wont to be. The table was not crowded, and almost all who sat round it were in the habit of meeting each other daily. Formal speech-making would have been utterly out of place there—so, at least, thought everyone except Mr. Brancepeth.

This honest gentleman had not so many opportunities of airing the eloquence on which he

rather prided himself, as to lose one when it presented itself. He had been a hard-working member of the Commons' House for many years; but his maiden-speech was yet unspoken. The whip of his party regarded Mr. Brancepeth with an immense respect and affection, as a model that hairbrained, garrulous legislators would have done well to imitate. He never asked importunate or impertinent questions, and when he was wanted was sure to be found in his place, ready to vote exactly as the keeper of his political conscience directed, listening always—or seeming to listen—with impartial patience to the declamation on either side, but never to be biassed in the faintest degree by argument, persuasion, or diatribe. Surely he had a perfect right to indemnify himself elsewhere for his silence at St. Stephen's; and few grudged him that simple satisfaction. At quarter sessions, agricultural meetings, and all manner of county gatherings, Mr. Brancepeth was always listened to with greater attention than more brilliant orators could command; whilst he glozed on through one smooth period after another, enouncing truisms like startling verities, and winding up with a peroration in which there was seldom any definite conclusion.

On occasions like the present he was great. The facetiæ that formed his stock-in-trade were

rather trite and mild, but from long practice he had acquired a knack of setting them forth so that they did not seem so *very* threadbare; and the fumes of champagne consumed at abnormal hours are apt to make an audience rather indulgent than critical. During the long purposeless afternoon, when the idea of dinner is as it were an abomination, we wax more captious, to be sure; and wonder how we could have been weak and base enough to smile at the platitudes floating in our memory. But this is a mere question of digestion after all. If any of Mr. Brancepeth's hearers felt bored or weary, they were polite enough to suppress all outward and visible signs thereof. So, in perfect charity with all man and womankind, he drank to the health of the bride and bridegroom, and finished with the comfortable conviction of having achieved no mean social success.

La Reine Gaillarde had a keen sense of humour of her own; and you may guess that the exhibition was not particularly agreeable to her. But she was not inclined to be hard on any innocent weakness: her sigh of relief was not too audible, nor her smile too satirical, when the orator sat down. Her lord and master had shown himself so very amiable about all arrangements, that she considered he had quite earned the license of making himself ridiculous if it

so pleased him. Most men think they have done enough if they play father to a comparative stranger at the altar, without placing their mansion at her disposal before or on the marriage-day.

Mark Ramsay replied in half-a-dozen sentences; and this was the only other interruption to the flow of general talk that went on pleasantly enough till breakfast broke up.

Availing herself of the widow's privilege, Blanche had dispensed with bridesmaids: so the cynics—if any such were present—were balked of the treat of hearing the acknowledgments of innocence and beauty spoken by the lips of Vere Alsager.

Amongst the advances of civilisation made in this our century ought to be reckoned the shortening of honeymoons. Very few conversationalists can talk quite up to their mark, if they know they are expected to be amusing; and the effect of being expected to be amative for a certain definite period must often be much the same. If our grandsires would confess the truth, we should hear, I fancy, that the sun drove his chariot somewhat heavily before the twenty-eighth day of enforced seclusion closed in; and, long ere that, there had been certain misgivings as to the perfect truth of the ancient adage—"Two are company: three are none." We have changed all this most assuredly. Even Mrs.

Malaprop, whose matrimonial ideas were somewhat in advance of her age, would lift her brows in wonder over the curtness of some wedding trips.

Dropping into a certain club on a murky afternoon last spring, to my great wonderment I lighted upon an ancient acquaintance in his accustomed place, smoking his cigarette, and sipping his *perroquet*, in the contemplative fashion that is usual with him when the day is almost done. I rubbed my eyes, so to speak, thinking that I saw a vision; or that, at the least, I must have been dreaming when I read, not twenty-four hours before, the announcement of his marriage. Inclining to this last opinion, I expressed it in so many words.

"There's no mistake," Randal Lacy said placidly. "We were married all right enough; and we went down to ——" (the precise locality of the Arcadian hostel don't signify): "but it rained all yesterday, and our windows were on the ground-floor, and the people walking under the veranda *would* stare at us; and so—and so—we came back to-day, you see; and I'm going to take Nellie to the Prytaneum to-night. We've got the stage-box; and she can sit back behind the curtain. Will you come? There's lots of room."

I do not know a happier *ménage* than this has been, up to the present moment of writing, in a

quiet domestic way; or one that holds forth fairer promise of so enduring.

Now Ramsay did not apprehend that either himself or Blanche would grow weary of each other in a *tête-à-tête*, even if it was somewhat prolonged: but he had an objection, on principle, to crucial tests, and opined that sufficient solitude for all reasonable purposes could be found in the skirts, if not in the heart, of a crowd. If Kenlis Castle had been habitable, he would have gone thither straightway; but there was much still to be done there before the bride could fitly be brought home. He might have found shelter in the country houses of half-a-dozen friends; but Mark was not minded to begin his married life by trusting to the mercies of another man's household. On the whole, he thought that Paris would be as good a lounging-place as any; and Blanche, when the idea was suggested to her, adopted it quite eagerly. So it came to pass that their second domestic dinner was eaten in the Place Vendôme.

It was one of the close sultry evenings, more trying to natural complexions than the glare of lamp or sun. Blanche was quite refreshing to look upon in her pale-gray dress—relieved at the neck and wrist by trimmings of filmy lace—not a braid of her smooth soft hair ruffled or awry; and with

just the faint flush on her cheek that an artist would have chosen to see there. Mark's critical eye took in every point of the picture with profound satisfaction, as he realised how much more suited to his taste was that demure little person than any brilliant beauty of the Fornarina type, magnificent in redundant outline and gorgeous colouring.

Two days of Blanche's exclusive society had made him more fully aware than he had ever yet been how thoroughly pleasant a companion he had found. There was nothing impulsive, or demonstrative, or expansive about her: though it was evident that she liked being petted above all things, she was not exacting, or lavish of her own caresses. It would have needed a very subtle analysis to discover a single acid drop in all her composition; but there was no danger, with her, of being cloyed with too much honey. The very sound of her voice would have been a specific for more irritable nerves than Ramsay's; and the most indolent of talkers deemed it worth while to be amusing only to provoke one trill of her low laugh-music.

With these thoughts in his mind, said Mark, after sitting silent awhile—

“Is there anything you care particularly about seeing here, Blanche; or are any of your commissions very pressing? If not, I think we might as well

move into cooler quarters whilst this heat lasts. Fontainebleau isn't half a bad place: there's always shade in the forest; and generally a breeze somewhere, if you know where to look for it."

"I've never been at Fontainebleau," she answered: "but it must be quite charming in this weather. My commissions can wait; and as for sight-seeing, I went through that penance long, long ago, when—"

Her face was a little grave as she stopped: the next instant, in spite of herself, she smiled.

She always thought kindly, if not tenderly, of honest Walter Ellerslie. It was with him she had lionised Paris when they had been married about a year; and she remembered how each morning at breakfast he used to pore over *Galignani* as if it had been a new drill-book—wrinkling his forehead, and knitting his brows, whilst he mapped out that day's work—conscientiously making a toil of every pleasure, after the fashion of a thoroughgoing British tourist. She had plodded through the weary round quite patiently then; but she had not forgotten her thankfulness when it was over. It was partly those memories that made her smile; partly the contrast of the present with the past. Truly there was not much fear of any woman, travelling under Mark Ramsay's escort, being driven against her will into

the performance of any duty whatsoever, much less an irksome one.

Thus the wise and worldly resolves of this pair went for naught, after all; and a full week of their honeymoon was spent, not only in solitude, but "under greenwood tree."

It was the very happiest week of all Blanche Ramsay's life. Even had she visited it alone, the place would have had great attractions for her. She liked intensely the slow drives through forest-land, and the long halts under the great oaks and beeches, that are just as liberal of their shade now, as when the beauties of the old time rested there after the "*hallali!*" had been sounded over a hart-royal; she liked the ugly, formal gardens that can scarcely have changed since the *reines mères* rustled along their alleys; she liked the quaint, low-browed courts better than if each had been a model of architecture. In this fancy she was not alone.

There are few places that bring up the past more vividly, to others besides antiquarians, than Fontainebleau. Though time, and neglect, and revolution have left their marks plainly enough there, a pleasant *rococo* savour still hangs about the place, heightened rather than marred by the restorations of the Citizen King. The double initials, "H. D.," intertwined so tenderly, still look

almost as fresh as when they were first set up to the glory of the superb courtesan who carried the garment of infamy as if it had been a robe of honour. In the Galerie des Cerfs you can stand on the very spot where Monaldeschi was done to death under the eyes of the Swedish Messalina. Leaning out of the window of the Queen's boudoir, you touch the *espagnolette* wrought by the cunning hand of Louis the lock-smith; and you can fancy the smile—half-kindly, half-scornful—with which the haughty Austrian paid the labour that proceeded of love. Altogether a place fitter to dream in, than many to which Art and Nature have been more kind.

Blanche had no drawback to her pleasure, in a suspicion that her husband was bored. He had seen all these things before, of course; but, if they had no fresh interest for him now, it was excellently feigned. Blanche could have stayed another and another week there, without a chance of growing weary; yet, when the hot weather broke up in rain that looked like lasting, it was she who suggested a move back on Paris. It was just the instance of womanly tact that Mark could appreciate; and that he could do so he showed plainly enough, though his approbation was not uttered in words.

CHAPTER XV.

THERE have been many changes in Paris of late years, besides those for which the Prefecture is accountable: old types, no less than old streets, have been swept away; and the British resident has not been exempt from the spirit of change.

A quarter of a century ago, he was a decent domestic creature, usually of a certain age; not absolutely in embarrassed circumstances, yet under necessity of retrenchment; and always bent on ministering to the educational demands of a growing family at a reasonable rate. *Cælum non animum mutabat.* After the first bustle of removal was over, he went on contentedly enough in his old humdrum way—the right of grumbling, of course, always reserved—looking out for his special corner-seat at Galignani's, as he was wont to look for the club arm-chair; indulging but rarely in the dissipation of a *café* dinner at his own charge; and frequenting theatre or opera not much more sedulously than he was wont to do during a trip to London in the old days. Little versed were these quiet spirits in the *chroniques scandaleuses* of the day; an *émeute* in the

Quartier Breda, interested them no more than a revolution in Ashantee. They seldom sought to master the intricate idioms of the foreign tongue; and if they could steer clear of glaring faults in grammar, were no more ashamed of their fine broad British accent than of any other proof of their nationality.

Amongst them there were always to be found, of course, certain roisterers, doing penance for past sins and follies in enforced exile; and not hankering the less after Egyptian dainties, since they were forbidden to taste the fleshpots. But these were the exceptions to the rule; and regarded with little favour by their fellows, who gave these black sheep as wide a berth as was consistent with courtesy—by no means encouraging them to frequent the pastures in which their own lambkins strayed.

That modest colony is utterly broken up and dispersed now. The remnants thereof have migrated to Tours, Toulouse, and provincial towns yet more remote from the costly capital, where the space left for the poor and needy is narrowed hour by hour. In their places sit another generation of aliens, differing from those sober sojourners as widely as Rochester and his crew from the worthies of the Commonwealth; scarcely aliens either, if taking art and part in all the vices of his adopted country can make out a man's claim to naturalisation.

The Anglo-Gaul at present is a jaunty gallant—usually in the flower of his age; with a full, if not a fathomless, purse; lisping out impurities with the purest of accents; and able to answer the *argot* of the *coulisses* in kind; found at all races within the Jockey Club *enceinte*; and, when *baccarat* is afloat at the Cercle des Crevés, holding his own undauntedly against all plungers—Jew, Turk, Christian, or infidel; in fine, hurrying down the broad slope of ruin in all respects with as easy a grace as if he traced his descent from Grammont or Montmorency. No wonder that the fair city accords to these strangers within her gates a very different welcome from that which she deigned to bestow on their modest predecessors.

In this especial clique, Ramsay could not exactly be reckoned. Till quite lately, he had been too poor to live their pace, and too prudent to hazard a certain break-down; and since he became wealthy, business of one sort or another had kept him chiefly on the other side of the Channel. But he was thoroughly at home here, and at two Cercles his face was better known than in any London club.

The season was virtually over; and each day the trains starting for frontier or seaboard carried away a heavier freight; but the Bois was not a solitude as yet, and a score at least of ancient ac-

quaintances greeted Ramsay the first time he appeared there. The news of his marriage had gone before him; and Blanche had to run the gauntlet of many curious glances, before their carriage reached the turning-point at the head of the lake. On the whole, she came out of the ordeal very cleverly.

"*Un peu pâlotte; mais gentille à croquer, avec une morbidezza délicieuse*—" said Amédée de Beaumanoir, a veteran *viveur* whose valuation of fresh faces carried as much weight as the Admiral's judgment of a yearling.

Coquettes of a certain grade know by instinct when they have achieved a success, before a compliment—ever so delicately veiled—has reached their ears. Despite this satisfaction, it was not without a sinking of the heart that Blanche realised, during that first drive, that she must not expect to have her husband entirely to herself for some time to come. She was not discontented or disappointed; for their *tête-à-tête* had lasted already longer than she had hoped; and she did not feel—much less look or express—surprise, when, after dinner that evening, he left her "to look in at the Cercle for an hour." A very elastic hour; for it slid into another day, and Blanche was sleeping placidly before it ended. At breakfast next morning it was so evident that she expected no excuse, that Mark never

thought of composing one. Nothing could be more prettily saucy than her smile, as she listened to his epitome of the congratulations offered him over-night. Mrs. Ramsay had a long list of commissions to execute for herself and others, and she preferred going about this business alone, she said: so they did not meet again till the evening. After an early dinner, they went straight to the Bouffes, where a famous operetta was being played for about the four hundredth time.

You know that operetta and the fashion thereof. Not a very potent or generous liquor fills the jewelled cup that the wicked princess waves before us so deftly. It has plenty of froth and sparkle, and flavour enough to please a not-too-curious palate; and there is small danger of the weakest head being turned thereby. Feet and hands—to say nothing of eyes—have quite as much to do as the lips here: the *prima donna*, if only she be perfect in such arts of provocation—though a singer whose compass and sweetness of voice could hardly vie with a Bayadère's—need seldom despair of triumph.

What would Beaumarchais have said of the public that can assist nightly at such a performance as this—never craving for novelty, and by their persevering enthusiasm giving the *claque*, after the first week, a sinecure? If he were in the flesh again,

he might, with some justice, have been severe on the derogation of Parisian taste; but wherefore we insulars should shrug our shoulders thereat, would be rather hard to say. How many times, I wonder, have you and I sat through a sensational drama, waiting patiently for the leap into a fathomless abyss, that would break the long dead-level of dullness? And how often have we gone, with a laugh ready cut-and-dried, to reward the one dance tacked-on to a patter-song, that gave vitality to the weakest of burlesques? Go to! Faith, hope, and charity shall flourish, for many a day to come, no less benignly on the hither than on the farther side of the narrow seas—faith in our playwrights, hope in their prolific talent, charity to their shortcomings.

The sort of thing was quite new to Mrs. Ramsay, and amused her intensely; indeed, in the opening scenes, there was nothing that need have called up "the blush on the cheek of a young person," unless the equivocal jokes of the libretto had been carefully studied beforehand. It was a crowded house; but one double *baignoire*, exactly opposite the Ramsays' box, remained empty till the middle of the first *entr'acte*. Then, with some bustle and flourish—as if willing to announce their presence to all whom it might concern—two women occupied it.

In the appearance of one of these there was no-

thing remarkable. Her face in the very first freshness of youth might possibly have been tempting; but now, in spite of cosmetics and carefully-dishevelled false hair, it was simply ignoble. There was a cowed, servile look about this woman. The flourish of her entry was palpably rather in imitation of her companion than an act of self-assertion; and she hesitated about seating herself in front, till an imperious sign from the other bade her do so. In this evil trade, as in others, there are bankrupts. When Lolotte Lalange's scanty stock of beauty failed, she had not wit enough to be either dangerous or attractive: she had just sense enough to know this; and to know furthermore that, if she would find food and shelter and clothing thenceforth, she must cease to traffic on her own account, and take wages—ever so nominal. Being of a torpid, pliable nature, by no means sensitive of affront, and always open to a peace-offering in any shape whatsoever, she had thriven thus far tolerably well on the bread of dependence. In that same bread—especially, I fear, if it be dispensed by female hands—there must always be a bitter leaven. Those who are bound to truckle to the caprice of crabbed old maids, or purse-proud widows, do not sleep upon roses; but—setting ignominy altogether aside—the unluckiest of “companions” may well feel thankful

to the Fates that have spared her the endurance of a harlot's tyranny.

The other woman was a striking contrast, and would have been remarkable in any place or company; though, after looking at her once and again, you might have been puzzled to decide where the secret of her famous fascination lay.

There was a good deal of character certainly in her face, with its low broad brow, which the strong crisp curls half-covered without shading—in the great hard eyes, that seemed as if they never would blench or soften—in the firm, well-chiselled nose, with nostrils always dilated as if they scented prey—in the full crimson lips, curling outwards, so that the level, gleaming teeth were never quite hidden—and in the square, cruel jaw scarcely tapering towards the chin. But it was essentially an unlovely face—one that wearied the eyes that dwelt on it, like a garish picture. If they had been asked to name its antitype in the animal creation, nine men out of ten would have pitched upon the tigress. She was *forte femme* in every sense of the word. There was physical power in every line of the straight throat, the round arms, and ample bust—white, and firm, and cold as Carrara marble; but a wasp-like waist only just saved her figure from coarseness.

Such as she was, Delphine Maréchal had wrought damage enough with her enchantments, to become a byword in a land where such sorceries are rife.

The world first heard of her as the wife of a captain of Spahis, in the army of Algiers. Of her birth and parentage, and of the manner of her wooing, nothing certain was known; but that Eugène Boisragon, on his return from furlough, brought back a lawfully-wedded wife, there was no reason to doubt. Before the second year of their marriage was half spent, there were many scandals afloat concerning her. It was whispered that long good service, and hitherto stainless reputation, did not save a certain general of brigade from sharp rebuke in high quarters, where such trifles as a *liaison* are seldom noticed. Eugène Boisragon, after a few outbreaks of jealous fury that his wife laughed utterly to scorn, had taken to desperate drinking, and was seldom seen sober off parade. Men all said that something worse than absinthe was working in his brain; and that he was off his head long before the last frenzy-fit possessed him, when he rode down alone, yelling like a maniac as he was, on the thirsty Kabyle yataghans. His widow went through no farce of mourning, but "made her packet" with the briefest possible delay, and betook herself to Paris—not without male escort. From that day

forth, she threw off the thinnest disguise of respectability, and went on her wicked way rejoicing.

Whether it was some faint scruple of remorse, or only a wild whim, that prompted her to drop the "Boisragon," and fall back on her maiden name—Heaven save the mark!—none could guess: but on any note or quittance, she signed herself Delphine Maréchal. She was much better known, though, as "La Topaze." Looking at her yellow lustrous hair, and tawny gleaming eyes, you were struck at once with the aptness of the *sobriquet*. She was no hypocrite, and disdained the common stratagems of her trade. She never affected softness or sympathy; and conquered without troubling herself to be winning. When her phantasy—and phantasies she had not seldom—was passed, or when the purse that supplied her reckless caprice was drained, she dismissed her lover just as she dismissed her lackey; and it would have been as vain for one, as for the other, to look for charity or compassion at her hands in after-time. Threats or complaints or entreaties were all met with the same hard, ringing laugh; and none, so far, had fared better than his fellows—from Achille, Prince de Senneterre, who for her sake left a fair young bride to pine before the orange-flowers had time to wither, down to Léon Gondrecourt, the struggling sculptor, with a face like an old Greek

statue, who left her presence for the last time with scarcely *sous* enough in his pocket to buy the charcoal that stifled him. She was not particularly clever, and passably ill-educated; but was endowed with a rude mother-wit, and a certain readiness of repartee. This, added to the known violence of her temper and utter unscrupulousness in revenge, made her much dreaded amongst her sisterhood; so that in most companies she took and kept the lead—queening it like a thorough usurper.

Rather royal, in her own fashion, La Topaze looked to-night, in a dress that few of her complexion would have dared to wear—a superb maize *moiré* trimmed with priceless lace—with emeralds flashing in her tawny hair, and round the carved column of her neck, and all over her ample white breast. The contrast of colour, that would have shocked any civilised taste, only seemed to enhance her barbaric splendour. Anyone fond of such parallels would surely have been reminded then of the famous Czarina, whose loves and wars, more than a century ago, kept all Europe on the alert.

As she entered, there was a stir through the parterre, and a murmur that might have been mistaken for subdued applause; and, before she had been seated three minutes, a hundred glasses levelled at her box answered the challenge of her audacious

eyes. To nine-tenths of the men present hers was a familiar face. To provincials, who saw her for the first time, their neighbours pointed out the celebrity, with the sort of pride that a Javanese might feel in the exhibition of a flourishing upas-tree.

On this personage Mrs. Ramsay gazed, with an eagerness of which she was more than half-ashamed. She was no country-bred girl, looking for the first time on the world's wicked ways. She had seen Pelagia flaunting in different guises in divers places ere now, without shrinking aside in holy horror at the sight, or feeling any special interest therein; but such a specimen of the sisterhood as this, she had never looked upon, and she was attracted by it as she would have been attracted by any other animal curiosity.

Whilst Mark, laughing outright at her eagerness, was answering her questions with a brief sketch of the antecedents of La Topaze, the door of the *baig-noire* opposite opened again and two men came in. One, a pale, boyish-looking Frenchman, came to the front at once; and evidently began some explanation or excuse, to which La Topaze gave no sort of heed—dashing it aside, as it were, with an insolent wave of her fan; whilst she glanced over her shoulder, as if waiting to be addressed by the other cavalier, who, after he had closed the door,

remained leaning against the wall, in the shadow. He came forward at last, and proceeded to take stock of the house through his glasses, in a lazy, leisurely way, before he troubled himself to reply to a remark from La Topaze, which was evidently either an angry question or a sharp reproach.

A man of proper presence, decidedly, with a tall, martial figure, and a face that must have been strikingly handsome once, and had not ceased to be picturesque, since it grew hard and haggard, and marred by a kind of lowering that told of evil temper not often controlled. It was a face, though, that few women would easily forget when they had seen it once. That Mrs. Ramsay had not forgotten it, was abundantly clear; for, as she caught sight of the newcomer, she started and drew back hurriedly, saying in a whisper—so low that her husband hardly caught the words—

“Good heavens! It is Vereker Vane.”

CHAPTER XVI.

IN the storehouse of almost every woman's memory—whether it be bare and poverty-stricken, or crammed to the threshold with treasures varied and manifold—there is kept a special corner for her “old loves.” I do not speak now of those who, having been interwoven to a greater or less extent in her life-skein, have coloured it with deep joy or deep bitterness—of those whose names never recur without a reminder, regretful or reproachful, of

How close to the stars we seemed,
That night on the sands by the sea.

I speak of those who in the old time could scarcely be distinguished from the rank-and-file of her friends and acquaintances, who never caused her pulse to flutter uneasily, or her cheek to flush unbecomingly; but who nevertheless proffered to her once, without stint or limit, the richest gift that was in their power to bestow, albeit it found no favour in her eyes—I mean, the wooers that wooed in vain.

If it be a weakness to wrap up these memories rather tenderly, it is one to which women of every shade of character are prone. It is just as likely—

rather more likely, indeed—to be found in the gravest prude as in the most frivolous coquette; nor does the state of their domestic relations seem to have much to do with it.

The historic Helen was probably not a much more conscientious personage than Schneider represents her. Yet her heart may have melted a little when, from the tower over the Scæan Gate, she looked down on the Achæan array, and remembered that each and every one of the chiefest there was expiating by exile from home, and peril of limb and life, the madness of having once aspired to her hand.

For an opposite example, take Lady Gatacre. That model matron for years has ruled every household in her parish with an iron rod—a merciless allopath, both in religion and medicine; forcing her doctrine, her physic, and her charity down the throats of the poor, whose cottages she carries at the point of the parasol. She regards all works of fiction as more or less emanating from the Father of lies, and romance in real life as a folly almost within the pale of sin. An upright woman, *s'il en faut*—she dresses the character to perfection; and towers at her board-head darkling and stately, not to be lighted up by sconce, lamp, or lustre. But, on certain evenings, you may see gleams of scarlet

breaking the sable monotony of her attire; and you recognise, with a certain astonishment, that the dame may have been admired once by such as look favourably on sombre, severe beauty. On such occasions there sits always on her right hand the head of a certain Chapter hard by. The Dean is a rabid Protestant, prone to take up his parable, in season and out of season, against the abominations of the Seven Hills; but my lady remembers what was his favourite colour in the old, old times—the times when a patient, hard-working curate asked a proud, penniless girl to share his fortunes, and took meekly, if not contentedly, “Nay” for an answer. Good Sir John stands in far too great awe of his spouse, to banter her on this or any other subject; but you may see by the twinkle in his merry moist eye, how thoroughly he appreciates her rare concessions to the vanities of this wicked world, and rejoices over these vulnerable points in the tough Amazonian harness.

The last time that Vereker Vane stood face to face with Blanche Ramsay, he had urged his suit for her hand as eloquently and earnestly as it was in his nature to speak; and had gone out of her presence in bitter anger. If she had ever regretted her answer then—and I believe she never had done so—she surely would have known none such mis-

givings now, in the flush of her own fresh happiness, and meeting him—thus. Nevertheless, the very proof before her eyes of how far he had gone astray, made her remember that she might have moulded his life otherwise had she so willed it; and a kind of self-reproach mingled with the natural pity of a woman who, having parted from an old friend in good estate, finds him again, brought very low.

It may be that something of this showed itself in her voice and manner; for Mark's smile was very meaning, as he answered her exclamation recorded above.

“Vereker Vane, without doubt. So he was another of your victims, Blanche? Why, you are nearly as bad as Miladi, in *Les Mousquetaires*: the traces of poison tell us *elle a passé par là*.”

His tone did not quite please her; though why she disliked it she could hardly have told. They had mutually agreed to pass lightly over the past, and to let bygones be bygones. Nothing, in theory, could be more convenient and comfortable; but she would have preferred a little more susceptibility—even a little captiousness—to that easy indifference.

The green-eyed monster is troublesome to deal with always, and a perfect pest sometimes; yet there be beasts abroad noisomer, or at all events more difficult to tame, than he. *Mesdames*, are you sure

you would approve of his utter extinction? Would it not be a pity, if there were use no longer for all the sweet sops, and potent charms, that are now employed to lull him to sleep? The zest and subtle attraction of danger, you know just as well as the boldest *matamore* of us all. The rambles of those who walk abroad after their own sweet will—unchecked and unwatched—are dull as an enforced “constitutional,” compared with the stealthy, albeit innocent, sallies of those whose footfalls are planted within earshot of a dozing dragon.

It is of masculine jealousy only I have been speaking. Feminine jealousy is, as we all know, not a ravenous wild-beast, but a virgin, serene if stern,—Justice, in fact, under another garb,—who never smites unreasonably, unrighteously, or on insufficient grounds.

So, as was aforesaid, Blanche felt slightly discontented, and answered rather more coldly than her wont,

“Not a victim, in the least; but I saw a good deal of him at one time; and I liked him very much in his way; and he liked me well enough to ask me to marry him, and too well to keep friends with me after I said ‘No.’ There’s the whole story. It wouldn’t make a chapter in the weakest romance that ever was written.”

He shook his head, always with the same smile on his lip.

"The poison works all the same; but it affects different constitutions differently, of course. What drives one man to drink, drives another to the *demi-monde*. Whether of the two is worse, the immortal gods alone can tell. Either remedy is worse than the disease, I should fancy. Vane's face has awfully changed, even since I saw him last; and that's not long ago."

Mrs. Ramsay shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"It's not a pleasant or improving spectacle. I'd rather look at the stage, I think; though I'm not inclined to rave about *Herodias*."

Just then the second act began. Vane had recognised, even more quickly than Blanche had done, who sat over against him. He scarcely checked the sweep of his opera-glass; and his left hand, that held it, remained perfectly steady; but his right, resting on the back of La Topaze's chair, grasped it so hard and nervously that the chair slightly rocked. He had become almost domesticated—if the term could be applied to such a life as his—in Paris of late, and took little heed of matters on the other side of the Channel. Nevertheless, he had heard of Mrs. Ellerslie's engagement to Ramsay soon after it was made public in England. He

took the news with an outward unconcern, that rather chagrined the purveyor thereof—a worthy gossip, who considered agreeable intelligence not worth the trouble of carrying. He was an ancient comrade of Vane's, and well acquainted with this episode in the other's life; furthermore, he had a grudge of long standing against him, and rather reckoned on the effect of his little *coup*. The Colonel only laughed boisterously; and swore with a great oath that a better match was never made up down below, and that the Devil himself could not tell which had the best of the bargain.

He had been drinking deeply already, or he would have scarcely spoken lightly, much less coarsely, of Blanche Ellerslie; but he drank deeper yet before the "little supper" was done, and contrived to make himself intensely disagreeable to all who assisted thereat—the newsbearer above mentioned being especially set upon and overborne. The thought of the engagement, whenever it recurred since, had always chafed him; but, as he had not read the announcement of the marriage, he never realised till this moment that the prize he had coveted was actually another man's chattel.

With men of Vereker Vane's temper, these realisations are no jest. Not being endowed with a very vivid power of fancy, they are less tormented

than their fellows by the spectral foreshadowing of grief or pain; but, when set face to face with the substance of these, they suffer more keenly. It is no figure of speech to say, that for the moment Vane was fairly blinded with passion: though he swept his glass mechanically backwards and forwards along the crowded boxes, they were all blanks to him, save one in which those two faces were framed. Yet it was a vague, purposeless rage, levelled rather at fate, and the force of circumstances that had balked him, than against a flesh-and-blood enemy. If someone had succeeded where he had failed, as well this one as any other. He bore Mark no greater grudge than a loser does the winner, where the stakes are ruinous, and the play perfectly fair.

So, in just the frame of mind to relish the antics of *Herodias*—they had made him yawn the third time he witnessed them, and this was about the fortieth—Colonel Vane sat down far back in the *baignoire*, whence he thought he might watch his opposite neighbours unobserved; for a certain savour of good manners, despite of evil communications, still clung to the sometime Chief of the “Princess’s Own.” The avowed protector of the most famous courtesan in Paris was inconsistent enough to have scruples about “staring.”

La Topaze was in no placable humour that night. The highest-born dame of the Faubourg was not more arrogant or exacting than she. She had got a grievance cut and dried: her cavalier had presumed to dine without her, *en ville*—an *outrage* only to be atoned for in the usual course of things by much contrition, rich bribes, or unlimited indulgence of her next whim. Yet the offender did not seem in haste to make his peace, or even to apologise for being late; but had handed over that trouble to smooth-tongued Adolphe—a conscientious parasite, always ready to take any troublesome thing, or person, off his friends' hands—for a consideration. To be sure, she had learned already not to look for any abject submission from Vereker Vane; and had learned, too, that it was scarcely safe to provoke him beyond a certain point. His fierce, overbearing temper had a kind of attraction for her. She was sick, even unto death, of the mincing ways, petty fractiousness, and languid love-making of *les Crèvés*; and liked her bear's growlings and roughnesses a thousand times better than their monkey tricks. Nevertheless she had no notion of letting neglect pass unpunished; and determined, if she could not make Vane contrite, she would at least make him uncomfortable.

Facing round with this intent, she marked in

what direction his glasses were levelled. Indeed, he did not disturb himself, or seem to notice that she had turned towards him, till she spoke. The woman's instinct, always on the watch for rivalry, added to the cunning of her craft, set La Topaze on the scent at once.

"My faith, Bruno" (for some time past the *cocottes* had called him by no other name), "thou art charming this night! Since when hast thou the wine taciturn? I marvel why thou camest here—*Nenni*; I marvel not. It was, apparently, to devour the little pale woman yonder. The morsel does not seem to me dainty; but perhaps thou hast found it to thy taste ere now. *Hein?* Art thou touched? Answer, at least, without blushing."

Blushing! It is the fashion nowadays to christen ugly things prettily; but he must have been an euphemist indeed, who would have given so tender a name to the dark flush on Vane's cheek. In truth, the aggression was singularly inopportune. Since that first access of jealous rage, his thoughts had turned into a milder channel. The sight of the quiet pale face opposite rather soothed than irritated him: he was trying to recall the cadences of some low caressing tones, just as one tries to piece together the fragments of a half-forgotten tune. Here, his reverie was broken.

Now the most besotted admirers of La Topaze were fain to confess, that her voice was not one of her chiefest attractions. It was a good serviceable organ; clear though not flexile, and proof, so far, against the effects of late hours and hard living; but its steely ring—which gave such effect to sarcasm or retort—the toughest nerves found, after a while, rather fatiguing. How that voice grated on Vane just then, would be impossible to describe.

He frowned heavily; and, as he glanced down on her, you might have seen the blood mount to his eyes.

“Leave me in peace, I counsel thee; and leave yonder lady in peace also. Are there not *cocottes* enough here for thee to dissect, that thou must fall foul of honest women?”

Her broad nostrils dilated; and she showed her white teeth—not smiling.

“Honest women!—Fine guarantee, my faith, for a woman’s honesty, that she should have been an ancient acquaintance of M. le Colonel Vane. Our tongues are free to speak of the greatest dames in France: I would know, why they should spare *une petite chipie d’Anglaise*.”

The phrase is not easily translatable; nor could

any verbal insolence be half so expressive as the gesture of her lithe fingers.

Daredevil as she was, a minute later she wished her words unsaid; as Vane rose up, with such a darkness on his countenance as she had never seen there. She had reason to know, that time and place could put no check on his passion when it was fairly roused; and shrank within herself in mere physical fear. If any mad temptation to violence assailed him, he controlled himself after one glance at the box opposite; and, taking down his overcoat, went out without uttering a word, flinging off the hand that La Topaze would have laid on his arm as if it brought contagion.

Vereker Vane's worst enemy might have pitied him a little, reading his thoughts as he walked away through the empty corridor out into the air. He had begun to hate his paramour with the sudden intense loathing that, unlike most rapid emotions, does not lightly pass away. He hated and despised himself yet more; and—desiring earnestly, for the moment at least, to escape—saw no way out of the shameful maze in which he had wandered for some time past. He did not walk straight away; but, though a fine rain was falling, paced backwards and forwards in front of the theatre, so persistently as to excite the suspicions of certain police-agents hovering about.

They concluded, from his manner, that he must have a worse object than a mere assignation in lingering there.

Standing back in the shadow, he heard after a while the *coupé* of Madame Maréchal summoned; and watched her come forth, followed by her frightened "sheep-dog"—her very robes rustling with passion—and fling herself into the carriage with an energy that set the springs a-quivering. He waited till they had driven off; and began to pace to and fro again, retreating into the dark nook when each fresh carriage was called up. Ere long a continuous stream succeeded the straggling departures; then Colonel Vane thrust his way forward till he stood just without the principal doorway, so that he was within arm's-length of all that passed out.

It was an odd anomaly—one that might have furnished a text to a homily-writer, or a sketch to a humorist. From youth upwards this man had been wont to work out his purpose by mere strength of will or hand, cutting all manner of knots without attempting to unravel them; from sentiment, properly so called, Witikind the Waster was not more exempt; and in his breast, specially after the life he had led of late, it was no more likely that pathos or tenderness should be found, than that lilies should bloom on sea-sand. Yet his heart fluttered like a bashful

boy's as he stood there—waiting to see whether, as she passed out, Blanche Ramsay would appear conscious of his presence or not. He no more dreamed of addressing her first, than of offering her any other insult. More oddly still—considering of what manner of man we are speaking—passion had little or nothing to do with his longing to hear her voice and touch her hand again. Rather, it was such a hankering after the better and pleasanter days now past and gone, as might beset any outcast reminded of these things suddenly by the sight of an ancient friend.

Before very long the Ramsays came out. Blanche chanced to be on the side nearest the pillar against which Vane was leaning: as he was just outside the doorway, she did not see him till her dress brushed his foot. She started and shrank back a little; clinging closer to her husband's arm. It was no wonder. Vane's face was not pleasant to look upon just then; and hair and beard dank with rain made it more haggard and wild. He marked the effect he produced, and was not a whit angry; only it was something like a groan that he gulped down as he stepped back a little to let her pass, slightly moving his hat, as if he had made way for an utter stranger. But, after a second's hesitation, Blanche held out her hand, with rather a nervous laugh.

"Is it *de rigueur*, to cut your old friends, Colonel

Vane, when you are living abroad? You are become quite acclimatised, they tell me; but I had no idea you were in Paris. I wonder, at least, that you and Mark have not met somewhere."

It was a falsehood, of course—such an one as certain moralists would find it very hard to condone—and, that it was a falsehood, the man to whom it was spoken knew perfectly well. He knew that she had recognised him hours ago; and that she had been made aware long ere this—even if she had not guessed for herself at the first glance—who and what were his companions. But he did not thank her the less; and let us hope that this white lie was covered, like a multitude of other sins; for assuredly it was conceived in charity.

The Colonel just touched the little hand, with a timid half-pressure—very unlike his usual grip.

"No: I've a pretty good memory for old friends, Mrs. Ramsay, even when they have new names; and as for cutting,—that would come well from me, wouldn't it? I seldom look at an English paper, somehow, except the sporting ones; and I didn't know that you were actually married, much less that you were in Paris; or I'd have hunted you out, and sent the regular congratulations, if I hadn't brought them. You must take them now in the

rough—both of you. Ramsay and I, at least, needn't stand on ceremony."

"Not exactly," Mark answered; "even if pretty speeches were your *forte*, Vereker. It is odd we haven't met. Never mind: better late than never. We're at the Bristol; will you breakfast there to-morrow?"

Vane accepted at once. Three minutes later he stood on the pavement alone, watching the lamps of a certain *coupé* gleaming away through the mist and rain.

There were high jinks in the half-world that night. Mdlle. Frétillon had lately so far honoured M. Bonasse, the famous financier, as to accept from him a modest mansion hard by the Barrière du Trone,—the price of which would have bought twice over a château and appanages in Touraine,—and called her friends and neighbours together to rejoice over *la pendaison de la crémaillère*. Over the Babel of tongues at the supper-table La Topaze's laugh rang out; and she was unusually brilliant in her pitiless sallies—levelled impartially at friend and foe—and none entered with keener zest into the *lansquenet*, that raged till dawn. But the door never opened without her tawny eyes were turning towards it—defiantly at first, then wistfully, hopelessly at last—in search of someone who never

appeared; and she did not carry it off so successfully, as to prevent everyone there present being aware that there had been something more than a love-quarrel betwixt her and Bruno.

"You did that very well, Blanche," her husband remarked as they drove homeward. "I should have been sorry if you had cut Vane outright. He felt himself in a false position this evening, I do believe; and that's a point gained, at all events. He'll never be thoroughly respectable; but he's too good still to swell the returns of killed and wounded, that La Topaze publishes yearly. He certainly left her in the lurch to-night. I shouldn't wonder if he were to break with the whole lot if he had a little timely encouragement. Shall we be benevolent, and try what we can do?"

Blanche assented very readily. But as, lying awake, she thought over these things, she was haunted by misgivings as to whether her hands were strong enough to deal with such a good work; and, more than that, if a blessing was likely to attend benevolence prompted by Mark Ramsay.

CHAPTER XVII.

On a certain forenoon towards the close of that London season, a party of eight sat down to breakfast in a pleasant bachelor house in Charles Street just as the latest church-bell ceased to chime.

The host was rather a character in his way. With every disadvantage of a start, and retarded by more than one early failure, by dint of energy, patience, and calculation, he had contrived, whilst still in middle-age, to climb to one of those high places in the mercantile heaven, which having attained, an adventurer may thenceforth lie beside his nectar, smiling at the toil and turmoil below. But Olympian *idlesse* would have been irksome to Richard Garratt. He was not a whit ashamed of his business, and applied himself thereto at certain seasons with the same cautious sagacity as heretofore; but he treated commerce as a master, not as a 'prentice now—taking his pleasure when and where he would, and taking it, too, right royally. He was quite aware of the weak points in his own breeding, and earnestly desired to amend these. From the commonplace weaknesses of the *parvenu* he was singularly free; but he affected—and did

not scruple to confess it—the company of men likely, directly or indirectly, to help him upwards in the social scale; and contrived to minister to their amusement—their profit sometimes—without ever truckling to their caprices or submitting to contumely, however covert or polite. A natural tact prevented him from presuming on good nature or forcing on familiarity.

The “swells,” as he *would* call them, soon found out that Mr. Garratt was ready to meet his friends cordially on club-ground without insisting on identifying himself with them in all places and at untimely seasons; and that he would cast the bread of hospitality freely enough on the waters, without expecting it to return in the shape of invitation-cards to the houses of their mothers and sisters. So the circle of his acquaintance widened daily, till it became quite as large as was convenient. Men rather plumed themselves than otherwise on being asked to one of the Sunday breakfasts in Charles Street. In truth, they were very agreeable entertainments.

However vagrant in his other habits, it must be a strong temptation—sport or business out of the question—that will draw any thorough-paced Englishman possessing a fixed abiding-place, many yards from his own hearthstone, fasting. And in this case there was a very strong temptation. Richard Garratt

was a born *gourmet*, though his taste had only of late years been cultivated as it deserved; neither was his *chef* unworthy of his large hire; and the guests, culled from different sets, amalgamated as a rule very fairly. On a Sunday forenoon in London, few idle men, who are not churchgoers, have anything better to do than to sit in judgment on the savour of delicate meats and wines. No one at these entertainments descended to tea—or to coffee, unless of the blackest, backed by a *chasse*.

On the right of the host sat Lord Morecambe; the intrepid and insatiable traveller, who had thrust his ferret-nose into more out-of-the-way corners of the earth than perhaps any other man living. Exploring was his profession; and he was just home from Patagonia on a short furlough, recruiting for an expedition which was to start from the southern shores of the Caspian, and end—indefinitely. A pale, puny, parched personage; and, like many others of his build, a voracious feeder. Indeed, his appetite was his chief encumbrance on his wanderings; supporting all other hardships cheerfully, he waxed desperately despondent under famine.

Next to him was Harry Polwarth—more at home certainly on the boards than in the barrack-ground; yet he was no carpet-soldier either, and none grudged him his brevet step after Inkermann. He had been

stage-manager to the Brigade for years; and each winter made a starring-tour through country-houses where amateur theatricals were carried out on a grand scale.

Right opposite to him sat his subaltern and crony, and butt to boot—Terence Tiernan; with the same bloom on his round smooth pink face, and the same mystified look in his innocent blue eyes, as when he first joined the battalion; though how he has contrived to preserve any outward signs of innocence is wonderful indeed. Rather prone to take offence, as a rule, he stands any amount of bullying from Polwarth “like a lamb;” and, in all respects, plays the faithful henchman to perfection.

“I’m awfully fond of Terry,” the other once averred; “I wouldn’t travel about without his photograph for any consideration. To look at it in the morning, quite picks one up after a night spent in indifferent company. There never were so many good qualities compressed into the same space of flesh and blood; and—God never made such a fool!”

Besides these, there were Jack Raymond—most cheery and urbane of vintners—who, having got through one fair fortune in the exercise of boundless hospitality, is trying, not unsuccessfully, to build up another by filling other men’s cellars; and Pierce Llewellyn, editor of the *Scorpion*; with two others

whom you have met before—Reginald Avenel and Horace Kendall.

If you could assist invisibly at the assemblage of seven or eight of the cleverest men you like to name, brought together for purely convivial purposes, do you think you would often listen to sustained talk worth taking down? I fear *Noctes Ambrosianæ* are nearly as imaginary as *Arabian Nights*; and when they do occur, the “crack” is generally three-handed, or four-handed at the outside. Richard Garratt could discourse sensibly enough on many subjects—with a lead; but he rarely took a decisive line of his own, much less attempted to cut out the work for others. On the present occasion his guests seemed to incline rather to the consumption than to the utterance of good things; and, though Polwarth was fonder of chaffing than of eating as a rule, breakfast was half over before he opened fire on his left-hand neighbour.

“You don’t like those sweetbreads *à la Monarque*, Morecambe, I can see; for you’ve only managed half the dish. You really should conquer your dislike to civilised viands: as it is, you don’t take enough to support life. Never mind: when I come into mine inheritance, and you come to stay with me, I’ll kill a fat buffalo, and you shall have the hump all to yourself. I daresay Garratt would

have provided a bear-haunch this morning, if you hadn't taken him rather by surprise."

"They are both very good things in their way," the other said seriously; "but you must be careful to bake the hump under a very slow fire; and the bear ought to be killed early in the spring, before he gets lean. After all, I think the paws are the best part of him."

"Tell us some more secrets of the *cuisine sauvage*," the other went on. "What's the best way of dressing a guide, for instance? *En chasseur*, I suppose? Don't look modest about it: you know very well you ate one when you lost your way in the Dolichoschian Mountains."

Most of the men laughed; but Tiernan made rather a wry face, as he set his fork down without touching some *aspic* which he had just taken on his plate.

"It's quite true, Terry," Polwarth continued; "and they read a short burial-service over the poor Iroquois before they put him down to roast, just like they do over sailors before they give them to the sharks. It was very considerate of you, Morecambe; I've always given you great credit for it. It shows how, under most trying circumstances, a real Christian can keep up appearances."

"It's very well to joke about it now," Morecambe said, frowning slightly; "but the real thing

isn't so comic. No; I never was in the strait of having to draw lots for a life; but I don't know what might have happened once, if we hadn't lighted, by God's mercy, on a lame deer, that was half-dead with famine itself when we got up to it in the snow. The night before, the men looked at each other very queerly—so queerly, that I see their eyes still sometimes when I have bad dreams."

There was not a particle of wounded vanity in the speaker's manner; only the gravity of a man remembering thankfully his escape from great peril. No one laughed now; and Polwarth, for a moment, looked contrite.

"You're a game old bird," he said; "and we stay-at-homes are not worthy to unloose the lachets of your moccasins. Haven't you done enough in your generation in search of the Great Unknown? I'd give something to see you settled once for all. You wouldn't be hard to please in a squaw; and More Court would be a comfortable wigwam, if it was made weather-proof."

"Well, there are one or two other places I want to see," the other returned placidly, making steady play with some Reform cutlets the while. "Besides, I'm too poor to mount an establishment properly at home; and though I don't much care where I sleep, I don't know that I should approve of roughing it

under one's own roof. I shouldn't approve of my wife's roughing it, I'm quite sure."

"Too poor?" Llewellyn interrupted, shrugging his shoulders. "What's that got to do with it? You may take your oath, your coronet has been fresh gilt already, at some time or another. Why should you be nicer than your forbears? A plum taken in season, how good is it! And there are several Golden Drops just now, about fit for plucking. What do you think of Mary Welsted—goes about with Lady Mandrake? Jekyl christened her Maria Maggiore—not a bad name either. She's substantial enough, in all ways, to prop up a principality, much less a peerage."

"A cut above my mark," Morecambe said—"morally, financially, and physically. I don't pretend to know much about domesticities; but I fancy any husband must sooner or later be in a false position, who gives more than three stone weight away. I've no idea of tying myself up yet, either for pleasure or profit, unless I find a stray Peri somewhere between the Caspian and Cashmeer."

Quite lately, by the merest chance, as if he had picked up a purse in the street, Tiernan had discovered he had rather a good bass voice; and since then he had become a perfect melomaniac—ready *quidvis facile, aut pati*, the better to cultivate his

organ. Kendall, of course, could be very useful in this way; and this was enough to account for their sudden intimacy.

When the name of Miss Welsted was mentioned, Horace had looked up quickly from his plate; and as the last words were spoken, he glanced across the table at Tiernan, who nodded and smiled in answer.

"What are you grinning at now, Terry?" Polwarth asked. "It's a most extraordinary thing, that grave matters can never be discussed in your presence without that indecent levity breaking out."

"I wasn't grinning," the other retorted rather rebelliously—he didn't approve of his *fin sourire* being so stigmatised—"I was only thinking that perhaps the Welsted Cup ain't quite such an open race as you imagine. How do you know the entries aren't closed already? Ask Kendall there: he can tell you something about it, I daresay."

An awkward pause ensued; for no one seemed inclined to put the question into words, though several asked it plainly enough with their eyes. At last Polwarth spoke.

"I suppose Terry means we're to congratulate you, Mr. Kendall, if he means anything at all; that's never more than even betting. Rather sudden, isn't it?"

It was a perpetual chafe to Horace, that men who seemed to be hail-fellows with all the rest of

the world would persist in addressing him formally. Furthermore, there was sarcasm, if not incredulity, in Polwarth's tone; yet he answered sweetly and smoothly.

"You won't make me responsible for Terry's indiscretion, I hope" (Polwarth's byplay on the stage was one of the best points of his acting; his start of surprise, and shudder at the familiarity, were perfect). "What I said to him was in confidence, to begin with, and didn't go half so far as you infer. I'm very good friends with Miss Welsted, I'm happy to say; but I don't know that I should care to be more. She's rather an overpowering person, as Morecambe says; perhaps she'd be too much for my weak mind. Don't you think so, my lord?"

The peer was a cosmopolite in the largest sense of the word. He had the faculty of becoming promptly hand-and-glove with any fellow-creature, utterly irrespective of race, colour, or degree; but he could assert himself pretty decisively on occasion, as others besides Kendall had found out to their cost.

"I said nothing about Miss Welsted's being overpowering. I simply said she was above my mark; it doesn't follow that she's above yours; and as to what your strength of mind may be equal to, I know absolutely nothing. I judge no man's character on short or slight acquaintance."

The taunt went right home, through the triple brass of Kendall's self-conceit; but instead of teaching him caution, it made him vicious.

"A thousand pardons," he said with bitter humility, "for asking your opinion about what couldn't interest you. You'll remember it was not I who mentioned Miss Welsted's name; I simply answered a direct question. I have a perfect right, I presume, to disavow any present intentions in that quarter. Indeed, to form any such, one ought to be quite fancy-free."

The fatuous smile, and the still more significant sigh rounding-off the sentence, were so intensely exasperating, that more than one of his hearers felt a keen desire to arise and smite the speaker on the cheek. Avenel, who sat next to him, could not repress a movement of impatient dislike.

Kendall did not seem to notice the effect of his words, but went on nibbling delicately one by one the grapes from a bunch that he held in his left hand, leaning his elbow on the table. The sleeve, loose after the fashion of that year, fell back naturally from the wrist, leaving the armlet that you wot of nearly bare. It may be that Tiernan desired to show that his new intimate was a person of more consequence than the rest of the company gave him credit for; or he may have been prompted only

by an ultra-Irish propensity to thrust in an importunate oar just when rocks and quicksands were ahead.

"Fancy-free?" he said, nodding his head again still more sagaciously. "How can a man be free at all, who goes about manacled? It's a pretty ornament, too, and a pretty idea. Let's have a look at it closer."

With a faint show of remonstrance, hardly masking covert exultation, Horace stretched out his wrist over the table. There, in bright relief on the dead gold, glittered the word "Nina"—legible, as ever was record of female folly since the days of Cadmus. Not half, certainly, of those present guessed at the story linked with the word: yet all, save one, guessed that there was something base and boastful in the action, and despised it accordingly. Even jovial Mr. Garratt looked on his guest with disfavour and some apprehension: he smelt the storm a-brewing; and this was the first time that quiet digestion had not waited on appetite at his entertainments. But Tiernan's blundering head was fairly loose, and, utterly disregarding the warning frown from Polwarth, he floundered on deeper into the mire.

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"Nina—eh? Not a common name, is it? I think we could put a surname to it, if we chose.

Perhaps we needn't go far from N to find the other initial. I should like to know how you came by it, though?"

"Stole it, most probably."

If Reginald Avenel had wrought no notable good in his generation, he assuredly deserved all the blessings that rest on peace-makers. The first article of his creed was, that to float on placid waters was absolutely essential to his personal comfort; and he had shown considerable tact, more than once, in healing disputes that might have rankled into quarrels. The most insolent and iniquitous of cabmen had never been known to provoke him to anything beyond banter—courteous, if severe. If a maroon had exploded in the midst of them, his friends could scarcely have been more startled than by such an interjection proceeding from him.

Kendall's outstretched hand dropped on the cloth sharply, as he faced round on the speaker, flushing to the roots of his hair.

"That's meant as a joke, I suppose," he said, with rather a lame attempt at a laugh. "I confess I don't quite see the point of it; and I'll ask you to spare me those jokes in future."

"It's meant as nothing of the sort," the other retorted; "I never was more serious in my life. A man who's capable of parading such a thing as that be-

fore half-a-dozen comparative strangers, and, so to speak, thrusts his confidences down their throats, is perfectly capable of petty larceny, in my humble opinion. It's a mere question of opportunity."

Despite the Provençal blood in his veins, Kendall was too cunning to embroil himself, if he could possibly avoid it, unless the chances were heavily in his favour; but no choice was left him here. He rose up, pushing back his chair in great heat and haste.

"I didn't come here to be insulted," he cried.

"No; you came here to sing after you had finished your breakfast"—Avenel interrupted, beginning to peel a peach scientifically; "so don't strain your voice, whatever you do."

"I—I tell you," Kendall gasped out, fairly hoarse with passion, "I could account—nothing easier—for how I became possessed of that armlet, if you had any right to ask for an explanation."

"But I haven't a right, you see," the other answered coolly; "and if I had, I don't know that I should care to press the question. Single-handed testimony don't go for much—under certain circumstances."

Here the host interposed.

"Look here: we've had more than enough of this. It's an unlucky misunderstanding from first to last. You'll promise me, both of you—I know you will—that this shall go no further."

Avenel arched his handsome brows in genuine surprise.

"My dear Garratt, are you dreaming? You talk like Polwarth, when he plays the heavy father. Nothing ever does go further in these days. I had very slightly the honour of Mr. Kendall's acquaintance before; and that little I choose henceforth to decline. I'm too sorry that I've broken up the harmony of the meeting; and I'll do penance now, by calling on an invalid aunt. When I'm gone, you can listen to love-stories as long as you like."

"No; don't *you* go, Avenel."

Richard Garratt was one of the most good-natured creatures breathing; and would have gone out of his way rather than tread on a worm; but, for the life of him, he could not help laying an emphasis on the personal pronoun that would have been significant to a duller comprehension than Kendall's.

"*I'll* go," he said sullenly; "indeed, I'd much—much rather."

Beyond the faintest of formal remonstrances from the host, no attempt was made to detain him; and Tiernan—who had assisted at the scene with as much astonishment as if he were utterly innocent of having provoked it—did not think it necessary to bear his *maestro* company.—

The after-breakfast talk in Charles Street was often prolonged into the afternoon; but to-day no one seemed to have energy enough to shake off the wet blanket that had fallen on the company; and the smoking-room was deserted a full hour earlier than usual.

Quoth Polwarth to his subaltern as they walked away together—

“I tell you what, Terry; we’ll have to take measures with your music madness. I don’t so much mind being driven wild at all hours of the day and night by your native wood-notes” (they lodged in contiguous chambers); “but if your tongue leads you into bad company, it’ll have to be slit, and that’s all about it. A pleasant sort of ‘pal’ you’ve picked up lately—a creditable sort of creature, to be Terry-ing you all over the place, and making you his confidant. All that happened this morning was more than half your fault. What the devil did you mean by trotting him out for a show? Ar’n’t you thoroughly ashamed of yourself?”

And the subaltern was constrained to confess that he had indeed “made a regular hash of it;” and that “Kendall had come out in rank bad form;” and furthermore, to promise that he would not again entreat this tuneful person to a dinner on guard.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AVENEL'S charitable resolve went the way of many other good intentions. His invalid aunt waited in vain, that afternoon, for the visit which was none of the least of her "consolations;" for that devout lady—though she would have been exceeding wroth had such an idea been suggested to her—did in truth prefer the company of this graceless nephew to that of more straitlaced relatives. Regy went to his chambers, and shut the door upon the outer world, in a frame of mind very unsabbatical and unsatisfactory. He was thoroughly discontented, not only with the aspect of things in general, but also with himself. In the first place he held it unworthy of a literate person to lose his temper, under any circumstance whatsoever, to the extent of speaking unadvisedly. Though he had maintained a decent outward show of coolness, he could not deny that his anger had passed boiling-point more than once—a gross mistake, to say the least of it. But there was worse yet.

Without wearing his heart actually on his sleeve, Avenel was more truthful than most men who have

lived his life. His moral law was sufficiently elastic; but the saving of a woman's credit was, in his eyes, about the only excuse which could turn a lie into a venial sin; and in such a strait he had seldom been placed. Now, this morning, if he had not spoken a falsehood, it is most certain he had acted one. He pitied Kendall no more than any other venomous creature on which he had chanced to trample; but the fact of his having come out of the encounter with flying colours did not make his cause the stronger. As a mere question of justice, what right had he to hold up the man as a vain braggart, not to be believed on his oath; knowing all the while that, base as the hint might have been, the other was only hinting at the truth?

Avenel had seen that armlet before, in a certain jeweller's shop that he was fond of frequenting—having a great taste for cunning goldsmith's work. He had been first struck by the device of the fetterlock; then by the name embossed on the gold; and—hearing it was for Lady Gwendoline Marston, who was expected to call for it herself—had bestowed on the damsel a waltz that same evening, with the express purpose of questioning her.

“It's for Helen Tyrconnel,” Nina said coolly, though her colour flickered as she spoke. “She's my pet friend, you know, and she's to be married

next Thursday. No one but her is to know where it comes from. Regy—you won't get me into a scrape by telling anyone? I hear sermons enough about extravagance as it is; and this one would be an awful homily. I'll keep a secret for you whenever you ask me—I will, indeed."

A pretty woman's confidences are not, as a rule, burdens grievous to be borne; and Avenel, though a philosopher in his way, had never studied in the Stoic school. He considered himself almost as one of the Marston family; all the Platonic devotion that he could spare was engrossed by Rose Nithsdale; and he would no more have dreamed of flirting with Nina than with any other child-cousin. But she looked too bewitching just then to be refused anything; and it would have been too absurd for Avenel to have taken up his parable against extravagance: so he gave the promise readily enough, and had never given the matter a second thought since.

Now—with his real regret at the girl's folly mingled a twinge of injured self-esteem, as he remembered how easily he had been fooled. Hoodwinking is not pleasant even when performed by a mistress of falconry; but it is more aggravating still to be blindfolded by a mere chit, who ought to be busy with her broidery-frame, instead of meddling with lures and jesses.

Over all these things Avenel meditated, smoking sullenly the while; but, beyond a vague impression that it behoved him to do *something* without delay, he arrived at no conclusion. He generally found Nithsdale House within the limits of a Sabbath-day's journey; and went straight thither on leaving his chambers, purposing, if opportunity should serve, to propound the difficulty to the Countess.

Of whatsoever shortcomings in respect to the Decalogue this lady may have been guilty, she carried out thoroughly at least one of its precepts—that of making the Seventh Day a day of rest. The attractions must have been exceptional that would have tempted her to dine abroad; and not above a dozen names were exempted from the general orders of “Not at home” on Sunday. Her boudoir was nearly as full as it could hold, according to Lady Rose's idea, when Avenel entered—that is to say, three besides herself were there assembled. Two of these were men, pleasant to look upon and to listen to, or they would not have been sitting where they were; and as it chanced—for this was by no means a *sequitur*—no less eligible as *partis* than as partners. The third personage was Gwendoline Marston.

Avenel knew the habits of the house well enough to be aware that a *coterie* such as this did not break up in a hurry; and saw no present chance of con-

sultation with Lady Rose; however, if his interest in securing a *tête-à-tête* had been purely personal, he never would have dreamt of sulking at its being deferred. Nothing could exceed the air of domestic comfort with which he settled himself into his favourite corner.

The concentrated wit of all assembled there would scarcely have furnished forth one brilliant conversationalist; but they were very pleasant in their own way, and relished their mild jokes, and harmless repartees, quite as keenly as sager and sourer people relish highly-spiced epigrams or venomous satire. If the laughter was not very discriminating, it rang none the less musically.

Lady Nithsdale was too indolent to take her proper share in the talk; but Nina more than made up for her sister's deficiencies. It almost seemed as if the girl had some presentiment of approaching danger, and guessed too from what quarter the danger came. If she had meant beforehand to coax Avenel into a good frame of mind, she could hardly have laid herself out more assiduously towards that object, or, to speak the truth, more successfully. Regy was not so often really amused, but that he could feel grateful to anyone, male or female, who purveyed him such entertainment. Before he had sat there an hour, he said within himself:

"She shall have another chance, though she don't deserve it."

And he resolved to bring Nina to confession, before betraying her delinquencies even to Rose Nithsdale. The opportunity presented itself sooner than he had reckoned on. Tea was scarcely over, when Gwendoline said:

"Will someone put me into a cab, and pack me off home at once? I'm dreadfully late as it is. We have to dine at Richmond—at seven, of all unchristian hours! And the Buckhursts are so awfully punctual."

"You'll walk home in about half the time," Avenel interrupted; "and I'll take care of you. I've over-stayed my time here too—considering what I have to do before dinner. You'll trust her with me so far, won't you, Lady Rose?"

Lady Nithsdale's eyes opened rather wonderingly. She was the least jealous and suspicious of mortals; but she was not wont to see Avenel so ready with his offers of escort; and she was rather puzzled as to the nature of the business which could call him away from her boudoir, so peremptorily, on a Sunday afternoon. She bit her lip, ever so slightly, as she answered:

"O yes: I can trust you—so far. I don't think either of you will get into mischief, between here and Carrington Crescent. What you'll do afterwards—"

So those two went off together. When they were fairly in the street, said Avenel:

"Have you heard from your pet friend lately, Nina? You know who I mean, of course—Helen Irnham, *née* Tyrconnel. Do you know where she is now?"

"I haven't heard very lately," she replied; and once again her colour flickered; "but I know she's in Paris. They went over before the Grand Prix, and won't be back for another ten days at least."

"You think so? Then you'd be very much surprised, if I told you that I met her at breakfast this morning—at a bachelor breakfast, too—in the Albany. Odd place to meet a bride in—wasn't it? Irnham's an easy-going creature; but I doubt if he'd approve."

In a bewilderment that could scarcely have been feigned, she stopped short, gazing up at him.

"What utter nonsense you are talking! What can you possibly mean?"

"Don't strike an attitude," he retorted. "You can hardly have learnt to be theatrical—already. I'm talking perfectly good sense, though in rather a roundabout manner. You gave that armlet to Helen Irnham, you know. Well: I met the wearer of it, precisely at the time and place I have mentioned. I recognised it directly. If I hadn't, I and

half-a-dozen more might have examined it at our leisure. It has changed owners, perhaps you'll say. No: I don't think you *will* say that, though; or that you will say that you don't know now what I mean."

Walking on by his side, she looked up again—very pale this time, but without a sign of flinching. Her lips moved before she spoke aloud. An ear laid close against them might possibly have caught three syllables—

"How could he!"

"You're quite right, Regy," she said aloud. "I'm not going to tell you any more falsehoods. I know what you mean very well. The bracelet has always been where it now is. I'm not sorry for that; but I'm very sorry that you have seen it, and seen it—so."

She could scarcely have gone on for the choking in her throat; but Avenel broke in here—

"You didn't reckon on his parading it, then? Why, those *novelettes* you're so fond of might have given you a better insight into the *jeune premier* form. He didn't steal it, after all? I'm rather glad I suggested the possibility, though."

The fire, slumbering always in the depths of the Spanish eyes, flashed out.

"You said that, knowing all the while it must be a base, cruel falsehood. How dared you?"

"There wasn't much daring required," he said rather scornfully; "and if there had been—though I don't pretend to be a champion—I'd have tried to screw my courage up to the sticking-point, to stop the name of your father's daughter being made a shuttlecock for the amusement of such a company."

The girl laughed insolently.

"My father's daughters are infinitely obliged to you. Such disinterested kindness is quite touching; I don't know what we can have done to deserve it. Don't you think the taking care of Rosie's reputation is about as much as you can manage? What is the disgrace if my name was coupled with his—just as if he were not better—cleverer—dearer in all ways—than the best of you!"

Her passion moved him no more than if Lady Nithsdale's pet lory, which he was always teasing, had pecked him rather sharply.

"I wouldn't take the passers-by into my confidence if I were you, however proud you may be of your secrets. That respectable couple nearly dropped their prayer-books, and looked quite scandalised. Child, all your heroics won't make a hero of Mr. Kendall. Troubadours are at a discount, even in Provence, just now. I don't abuse him, mind. I know nothing of who he is, or whence he comes; and, if what I've heard is true, perhaps he

couldn't give us much information on those points himself. But I know, that if he were all you say, and more, he's not a fit person to be flashing about *gages d'amour*—or *d'amitié* either, for that matter—from Gwendoline Marston. However, we won't discuss the question any farther. It isn't likely we shall agree; and, as you very properly observe, it's no concern of mine. I suppose it does concern slightly your mother and father, though. We'll refer it to one or both of them, if you please."

She stopped short once more—luckily the street was nearly deserted just there—clasping his arm with both her hands; so that, without actual violence, he could scarcely have stirred from where they stood. The same terror was in her face; but the threat of betrayal worked far more powerfully now than when, two months ago, it brought her, outwardly at least, to submission; for, with the dread of being separated from him, there mingled a vague apprehension of insult or injury imminent over Horace Kendall. The big drops gathered slowly in her eyes; and there came into them the expression—at once piteous and desperate—that may be seen in those of a deer brought to bay on a crag's-edge, where the sole chance of escape from the hounds is a leap into air. An old, old simile that; but an apt one, nevertheless. Those who have ridden straight from the find under

Dunkerry Beacon to the finish on the Channel cliffs, can bear witness that the first half of the parallel is no flight of fancy: the second, I fear me, will hold good to the break of the Millennium, when womanhood shall have no more sorrow.

"You won't do that, Regy," she said at last in a faint voice; "not just yet, at least. You'll give me a week; well, then, three days—just three days. I promise—I swear—I won't do anything rash; and I'll tell you honestly what I have done. Of course you are right; of course they'd lock me up rather than let me see him; and I'm so helpless: but I must, I must tell him in my own way that it's—that it's all over."

To Avenel's consternation—for under the most favourable circumstances of time and place he dreaded a scene—she fairly broke down here. How at that moment he regretted ever having meddled at all, is not to be told. His first impulse—rather a cowardly one, it must be owned—was to calm Nina at any price; but he really pitied her besides.

"For God's sake don't do *that!*" he said imploringly. "I don't want to bully you, if you'll only be reasonable; or to get you into a scrape either. I never told tales of man, woman, or child yet. There, I'll take your word, and keep your secret; but you'll

set all straight, like a good, sensible girl, won't you? You'll thank me for this one of these days."

As she dropped his arm, and moved on again, she smiled up at him through her tears—a quaint, sad smile.

"Perhaps I may. I thank you now, at all events; and you sha'n't repent trusting me, Regy."

Not another word was spoken till they reached Lord Daventry's door. As her escort was about to ring, Nina laid her hand on his wrist.

"Only one thing—you won't do, or say, anything that could hurt him?"

Avenel prided himself, with great reason, on the evenness of his temper; but, for the second time that day, it was fairly ruffled. The obstinacy, and wanton waste of solicitude, were more than he could bear. He shook off the little hand with a certain roughness, and rang the bell sharply.

"I'm not in the habit of abusing people behind their backs; and Mr. Kendall and I are not on speaking terms."

He walked away without further ceremony, leaving the damsel planted somewhat disconsolately there. A lively Richmond dinner, I suppose, is rather the exception than the rule; but few of us have undergone such a penance as that evening's entertainment proved to Gwendoline Marston.

hated his host for not taking his part; Tiernan, for the unlucky question that provoked the debate; each and every one of the assistants thereat for being witnesses—not ill-pleased witnesses either, he fancied—of his discomfiture: most savagely of all, of course, he hated Avenel; but he would sooner have accused Gwendoline Marston of bringing him to grief with her romantic whims than imputed to himself a tittle of blame.

Yet if he were not troubled with self-reproach, Kendall spent about as uncomfortable a Sabbath afternoon as can well be conceived. He too went straight to his own rooms, and did not stir forth till the evening; when he was engaged to dine out. It was a large party, made up of an exclusively musical set. It was odds against anyone there present having been made aware of his misadventure in the morning; nevertheless, Kendall felt as if every glance that dwelt upon him for more than a second's space was either inquisitive or derisive: when there was low talk and laughter at the farther end of the table from where he sat, he grew hot at the suspicion that he himself furnished matter for the jest. He could not well refuse to sing; but one attempt showed so plainly that his plea of not being in voice was no formal excuse, that the mistress of the mansion forbore to press him further. Horace was right glad

to get back to his own rooms again. Intemperance was not among his vices; but his nightcap that evening would have fitted a much more seasoned head; and even this procured only feverish and broken sleep.

Few men, indeed, reach their life's end without having cause to remember what it is to wake with the consciousness that trouble is lying in wait just beyond the threshold of the day. Most of us know only too familiarly that "evil quarter-hour," and the manner thereof: how there comes at first a vague impression of something having gone very wrong; and how that Something looms nearer and larger, like the images of the phantasmagoria, till it confronts us in full, it may be in exaggerated, proportions. Certain adventurers, they say, in the course of warfare with the world, become proof against this, amongst other human weaknesses; but, fortunately for society, such mighty Adullamites are rare. A racking headache did not improve the colour of Kendall's morning meditations. Not without a misgiving of what the post might have in store, he reached out his hand for his letters. Only one, as it happened, was of the least moment; and was brief enough in all conscience.

"At eleven, in the old place. You must be there. N."

That was all. Nothing, one would have thought, to make his hand shake as he read the note and cast it down beside him with an oath. With what, or with whom, he was angry he himself could scarcely have told you: that curse was not levelled at any one head in particular; but things in general seemed going contrary; and, with men of his kind, blasphemy is the readiest panacea.

That the note had something to do with the occurrences of yesterday morning, he felt sure. How could she have heard of it, though? Avenel had told her probably—this time the malison *had* a mark. If it were only Nina's anger, he could set that square easily enough; but suppose Lady Nithsdale had been told too? This would complicate matters considerably. It would come to Lady Daventry's ears next, and then— Well, he would hear the worst or the best of it soon; and there was not much time to spare, if Nina was not to be kept waiting; which, under the circumstances, might be hardly advisable. She might just as well have made it an hour later, though.

Grumbling to himself in this wise, Kendall arose; made a careful toilet, though not quite so scientific as usual,—he had become a thorough *petit-mâitre* of late,—swallowed a cup of coffee, more as an excuse for the *chasse* than for its own sake; and reached

the trysting-place a minute or so before the appointed hour. As he put his watch back after ascertaining this, he saw Gwendoline Marston approaching. Kendall's perceptions, when his own interests or inclinations were not immediately concerned, were not very keen; but, as the girl drew near, even he guessed that it was not only to upbraid him that she had summoned him thither. Her head, instead of being lifted in eager expectancy, as it was when they met there before, was bowed dejectedly; and her step, as she came slowly across the grass, was liker a sick woman's, than that of a girl with Spanish blood in her veins.

"What has happened?" Horace asked, as he took her hand in both his own. He had intended to treat the matter in a light, off-hand way; but when it came to the point, his nerve failed him. It was evident enough, from his manner, that he divined the nature of her news.

"Can't you guess? Have you forgotten yesterday morning already?"

In her tone there was nothing of reproach or scorn, only intense sadness: nevertheless, he dropped her hand at once, and his countenance fell.

"So you have heard of it—his version too—and you have come to take his part now? His conduct, of course, was chivalrous, and all the rest of it; and mine—"

"You are quite wrong," she interrupted, always in the same quiet, sad voice. "So little was told me, that I can only guess at what was said or done; and you would not say that I took his part, if you had heard me speak yesterday. That fetterlock was a very foolish fancy of mine, I know; but I never thought that anyone besides you would have laughed at it."

"I never meant to show it. I can't help it, if you choose to make an unpardonable sin out of a mere accident."

His eyes were bent sullenly downwards as he spoke; but it needed not to look into them, to know that he was lying. Some such conviction, perchance, was borne in upon Nina, despite herself; for she answered only the last words.

"I have nothing to pardon, dear; you have not sinned against me. It was not because I am ashamed of caring for you, that I begged you to be cautious. It was because I felt there would be dreadful danger, if anyone else were taken into our secret. I didn't hear who else besides Regy Avenel were present; but we are at his mercy, at all events. Now you know what has happened."

"Curse his insolence!" he said viciously. "What right has he to dictate to me, or to set himself up as your protector? He shall suffer for this somehow, by—!"

She shrank away from him now.

"Hush! I should hate to hear such words from you, even if they could help us in the least. I don't say he's any right to interfere; but if he thinks he has, it comes to the same thing. He won't be frightened into silence, I'm very sure. It was all I could do to get three days' grace. He won't betray us till I've seen him again: he won't betray us at all, if I act, as he calls it, 'sensibly.'"

"Sensibly! That means giving me up for good and all. Well, it's a modest condition, and not hard to fulfil. That's what you are driving at, I suppose?"

As she gazed up at him her eyes brightened, not with the gleam of quick excitement, but with the steady light of resolve.

"So hard—that I think I would die before I would promise any such thing. We must have patience and faith, dear; that's all. We must not meet again, except by accident, for a long, long time. Indeed, indeed we have no choice. I've not been very carefully watched, hitherto; but, if this were known at home, I should be simply a prisoner, till they had made sure that we were parted for ever. You know this as well as I do—don't you, now? I'm miserable enough as it is, without your being unjust and unkind."

He stood silent awhile, debating what he should answer. A strong temptation just then assailed him;

the temptation to test his power over Nina there and then—to try whether he could not induce her to cast in her lot with him at once, by consenting to an elopement so soon as opportunity should serve. He did not mistrust his own eloquence; and she had never looked so attractive as at this moment. To a man of his vainglorious temperament, the notoriety of such an adventure was in itself a strong inducement: nevertheless, he forbore. Thinking over these things afterwards, he took infinite credit to himself; yet pity or generosity had wonderfully little to do with it. The safety of his own precious person, was with Kendall the chiefest of all earthly considerations. He had a strong impression, that the Law might call his romantic escapade by some uglier name, that would render him amenable to all manner of penalties. Furthermore, he argued within himself, that he and his bride would have to feed almost literally on crusts till such time as it should please the Daventrys to condone the offence; and after all, now and then, such monsters as parents indefinitely relentless, will sometimes outrage dramatic proprieties. If the whole truth must be told, there was in the background of his meditations a certain figure—not a comely one, albeit a woman's—whose stout forefinger was first raised in warning, and then pointed to a goodly pile of money-bags. On the

whole, he came to the conclusion that the forward game was scarcely suited for his resources; and that the best policy would be to yield, as gracefully as might be, to the *force majeure*. Whilst he thus reflected, his anger had full time to cool. The charlatan was himself again, and fell into his theatrical mannerisms quite naturally. His facial muscles were remarkably well-drilled; and his plaintive expression of self-sacrifice might have imposed on a keener critic than poor Gwendoline Marston.

"It was too bad of me to speak so," he said, almost in a whisper. "But this is such very sharp pain; and it has come on me so suddenly. Not to meet again for a long, long time; so long that we can put no limit to it now. Do you know what that means—for me? It means that the aim is taken utterly out of my life; and that I wander on henceforth without hope that to-morrow will be brighter than to-day. It means that I must not think of you as mine any more except in my dreams; that I ought not to wear this any longer,"—he stroked the armlet tenderly,—“because, before I see you alone again, someone else may have a better right to wear it. It means all this. I don't murmur or rebel: I would bear a hundredfold more sooner than bring any trouble on your head. I will not even blame you if you forget me. For you will not be like me; you will often be tempted to forget.”

It was a pretty recitative enough, and gracefully delivered too. Nevertheless not a few women, deeming the sentiments something too sublime, and the periods something too neatly turned, to have come straight from the heart, would have requited the effort by a smile. But every word came to Nina's ears with the golden ring of truth. The last three months, measured by their influence on her character, might count for years; but, though she was a woman now in energy of purpose and strength of mind, both to dare and to endure, she was in many ways the veriest child still—just as prone to invest her tawdry idol with all manner of god-like attributes, as when she first bowed down before him. As she looked on Horace Kendall, it seemed to her that she looked on the sublimity of devotion; and the tears, that had gathered more than once during the interview under the long dark lashes, began to rain down fast. She bowed her face upon his arm; murmuring as she pushed the armlet back on his wrist:

“You will always keep it; you will not forget?”

“I never will. I never can.”

The spot of their meeting was well chosen. The trunk of a huge elm screened them from most passers-by; and on such a morning there were few loiterers in the gardens. Nevertheless, there is a time and place for all things; and the cavalier, even if the lady had lost her head, might certainly have

remembered that the pose was such as ought only to be rehearsed *intra muros*.

But Horace took no heed of such trifles, as he launched forth into a fresh tirade. Perhaps the girl's passion was really to some extent infectious: but Kendall dearly liked the sound of his own voice; he was in the vein that morning; and it was not likely that so fair a chance of airing his eloquence would soon again present itself. Moreover, though he judged it politic not to put his hold on Nina to the breaking-strain, he had no mind it should be loosened, except in his own good time. So he poured forth a string of promises, consolations, and endearments, much to his own satisfaction, and greatly to his hearer's comfort; for, whilst he was still in mid-career, Nina lifted her head, half-smiling, as she dried her eyes with an absurd little filmy kerchief, that never was meant for such serious work as the stanching of tears.

"Practising for private theatricals, I presume, Nina? Will you present me to your dramatic friend?"

As the words were uttered, the speaker unmasked himself from behind the trunk of the elm.

Horace Kendall was fond of stage-effects, as you know. But in his programme it was not set down that he should find himself face to face with Raoul, Earl of Daventry.

CHAPTER XX.

SOMEONE—an eminent divine, if I mistake not—once valued a thoroughly good temper at 500*l.* a year. If such things were marketable, Lord Daven-try's ought to have commanded a fancy price. His had not been one of the level, uneventful lives, that cause men to laugh and grow fat; almost all his pleasures, from youth upwards, had been more or less fraught with danger, moral, physical, or finan-
cial; and he had generally indulged his fancy with-
out counting the cost or consequences. Nevertheless, few could say that they had seen the peace of his great brown eyes troubled by impatience or anger: as for fear—the Marstons, male or female, had not been hampered by that weakness for some genera-
tions past. It was quite a treat to see him go in to back one of his own horses for a stake at a large race-meeting. The layers of odds knew pretty well when Lord Daven-try meant business; and, before he opened his mouth, would gather round him ravenously. Amidst all the turmoil and uproar, there he would stand, a perfect picture of repose; reminding one of the beautiful sea-birds that, in

wild weather, may be seen rocking betwixt purple billows. Through the clamour of many voices, hoarse and shrill, you would catch sometimes his clear, quiet tones:

"In hundreds? Yes, you may put it down again.—And once more with *you*, Mr. Irons.—An even monkey to finish with? Thanks, that will do; no more."

And then he would close his book, and saunter off to look at the race; with less apparent interest in the result than any man on the ground. He was not at all nice in the choice of his company; and, if he had any purpose to serve, would just as soon be seen in earnest converse with a clever outsider as with the most venerated of turf magnates; but somehow he seemed to have acquired the secret of touching pitch without being defiled. He never dreamed of keeping anyone, gentle or simple, at a distance; yet perhaps not twice in his life had he had occasion to repress insolence or familiarity.

"I wish I'd your knack of keeping people in their places. It's all that infernal quiet manner, I suppose; but it ain't so easy to master."

Thus would grumble Sir John Pulleyne—envious, and not without cause; for that blatant baronet, when he cursed jockey, trainer, or professional, not unfrequently got to the full as bad as he gave.

Even at whist, the Earl never visited the most atrocious fault in his partner more severely than by a slight shrug of the shoulders and a compassionate smile. Once—the blunder was an exceptional one, and had cost him something over two hundred sovereigns—he was heard to say reflectively:

“I’ve been at it now for about thirty years; and I’ve come to the conclusion that play rather tells *against* one than otherwise.”

But this remark was not made till the rubber had been some time over; and it was murmured too low to reach the ears of the offender. Neither was he one of the “angels abroad and devils at home,” that seem to be less uncommon since cigarettes and absinthe came in. His wife had always had quite as much of his attention and society as she cared to claim: though he never interfered with the actual management of his family, he liked to have his children with him; and, when he had leisure, was always willing to minister to their amusement.

Of all the unlucky coincidences in life, the most frequent, certainly, is the unwelcome presence of the “very last person one expected to see.” Lord Daventry’s presence here was purely accidental. He had business to transact that morning with a famous turf commissioner; and, for reasons best known to himself, had chosen to confer with this potentate at

the latter's own house in Tyburnia. His nearest and pleasantest way back from the interview lay through Kensington Gardens; and, as it chanced, it led him within a few yards of the trysting spot. His friends were wont to deny that anything could possibly surprise Daventry; but this opinion might have been modified by whoso had read his thoughts when he first recognised the female figure in the interesting group over against him. It was a breach of delicacy, of course, to approach unobserved, and to listen to sentiments never intended for his ears; but, I think, few British parents, under the circumstances, would have acted more chivalrously.

Being such a manner of man, you may guess that there was nothing very awful in the demeanour of Nina's father, though his appearance did savour of the *Deus ex machinâ*; but, if he had descended from the clouds with all the attributes of Jupiter Tonans, the pair before him could scarcely have been more startled. Their first impulses of surprise were thoroughly characteristic of the two. Horace stepped a pace backwards; Nina drew ever so little closer to her lover's side. She spoke first, too; though it was in a very faint, unsteady voice that she named—

“Mr. Kendall.”

The Earl lifted his hat. With whomsoever he

was dealing, he could not for the life of him omit any form of courtesy. If, during the Reign of Terror, he had been forced to pass through Sanson's hands, when they first met face to face he would not have failed to salute the headsman.

"One of the west-country Kendalls?" he said interrogatively. "No? That is the only family of the name with which I'm at all acquainted. Ah, now I remember! I have heard of a Mr. Kendall with a wonderful voice. Have I the pleasure of speaking to that—person?"

The pause before the last word was just long enough to give it point—no longer. Horace's scattered thoughts had not rallied sufficiently to enable him to do more than bow an assent to the suggestion.

"Exactly so," the Earl went on. "This daughter of mine seems to have a good deal of dramatic talent, and I suppose you're assisting her to cultivate it. We're infinitely indebted to you, I'm sure. Nina my dear, I think you've had about enough rehearsing for one morning. You found your way here alone, I presume, and I have no doubt you could find your way home just as easily; but there's no necessity for that. Will you be kind enough to sit down there"—he pointed to an unoccupied chair about fifty yards off—"till I'm ready to escort you?"

I sha'n't detain Mr. Kendall ten minutes; but what I have to say to him I don't choose you to hear."

Very keen, according to the poets, are the perceptions of hate and fear; yet are they much keener than those of any true woman, when it is a question of pain, or peril, or even discomfort, impending over the man who has the keeping of her heart? What caused Nina to apprehend that her lover might fare ill, if left unsupported to the tender mercies of her urbane sire, would be rather hard to say; but, having such a misgiving in her mind, her first impulse follows as a matter of course. The wound may be but skin-deep, and he for whom it was incurred is not always cognisant thereof; but wonderfully often, in the tragedies and comedies of this life of ours, that scene is enacted which gave Kirkconnell Lea a name in story.

"It was all my fault, papa," the girl cried out: "it was indeed!"

The Earl smiled compassionately.

"My dear Nina, I have no doubt that your first French governess taught you that *qui s'excuse, s'accuse*. I didn't say anyone was in fault. I only said, 'Sit down there till I am ready to take you home.' Will you do so at once?"

His steady eyes quelled the rising rebellion in

Nina's breast. Very slowly and reluctantly, like one who yields to the mesmeric will, she did as she was bidden: she looked back once over her shoulder; and then her lips rather formed than uttered the single word "Good-bye." The Earl's glance followed his daughter, till she sank down on the chair he had pointed out. When he turned again on Kendall, his brow was still smooth; but the smile was off his face.

"Now, perhaps you will explain the meaning of all this."

Kendall had expected some such interrogation for the last five minutes, and was prepared to reply to it after a fashion. He began a pretty set speech, wherein he was aware that he was scarcely worthy, &c. The Earl cut him short before the second period was fairly turned.

"Ah, we'll leave all that out, if you please. I prefer to listen to that sort of thing from a stall in the third row. I want a plain answer to a plain question. All clandestine meetings have some object, I presume. What was yours this morning?"

Kendall was a craven to the marrow of his bones; yet something in the other's manner goaded him into a show of spirit.

"My object?" he said doggedly—"The same object that any man might own who loves a woman

in truth and honour, and hopes to win her in spite of some differences of station. It may sound presumptuous, of course; but I have yet to learn that I have anything to be ashamed of."

The Earl bent his head in quiet assent.

"I think you *have* a good deal to learn, Mr. Kendall. I'm obliged to you for coming to the point, though. Perhaps the less said about truth and honour the better; our ideas are not likely to coincide. Mine are old-fashioned, I dare say. The set I've lived with are not very strait-laced; but they're plain people, who would call compromising such a mere child as that one yonder little better than kidnapping. No: I'm not prepared to say that there's any particular presumption about it. Intellect marches on so fast, that very soon any man, within the franchise, will be entitled to ask any other elector for his daughter. I suppose, however, the said elector will retain, for some short time to come, the right of saying 'Yes' or 'No.' You are good enough to allow that there exist some slight social differences between yourself and Lady Gwendoline Marston. Never mind that. I'm speaking to you now as if your birth and breeding were on a par. You know best what your own resources and expectations are. I don't want to hear a word on that subject, for the simple reason that neither now

nor at any future time can it possibly interest me or mine; but, before you think seriously of winning any woman, gentle or simple, wouldn't it be better to consider how you are going to support her? Now, listen to me. There's a certain sum settled on my younger children, of course; but Lady Daventry and myself have the 'power of appointment.' Perhaps you don't know what that means. Well, I can tell you. It means just this: that I can prevent any one of those children from being one shilling the better by that same settlement during my life or after my death. Now this power, in case of need, I intend to exercise to the last letter. If a daughter of mine marries without my consent, she is cut adrift from her family from that day: I would rather thenceforth help with my purse or my influence the merest stranger, than her, her husband, or her children, however sore their strait might be. I shouldn't waste breath in cursing; it would be much simpler to leave her alone to bear her own burdens. Under the circumstances, so long as I lived—and I have a very fair constitution—I don't think the 'connection' could be turned to much account. I can't answer for Lady Daventry, of course; but I have an idea that her feelings would not be easily worked upon. You have heard what I say—speaking for myself. I will never alter or abate one syl-

lable, so help me God! Are you in the same mind still?"

In the same mind? No, certainly not that; but the precise state of Kendall's sensations at that moment could not be easily set down in words. He was quite clever enough to distinguish between vapouring menace and substantial warning. He acknowledged within himself that the man who had uttered those words would be more likely to die than to relent; and—standing there with scarcely a wrinkle on his white forehead, or a silver fleck in his chestnut curls—Lord Daventry looked provokingly full of vitality. Weighing the certainty of heavy risk against the faint chances of remote gains, the speculation was hardly such as to tempt a prudent pauper, with his way to make in the world. Nevertheless, Horace could not bring himself at once to relinquish it. To begin with, Nina had strong attractions for him—social and mercenary considerations apart. He knew that to many others besides himself her face seemed very fair. There was incessant food for vanity in the thought, that men who scarcely favoured him with a careless nod, and who would have blackballed him from head to heel in any ballot whatsoever, might have laboured long to secure one of the smiles that for him had ceased to be rare. He liked the girl's wayward

daring, perhaps all the better because it contrasted so strongly with his own cautious, calculating nature. Furthermore, there was working within him—though this, perhaps, he was utterly unconscious of—the black acrid poison that, since the world was young, has leavened the ferment of so many revolts—the spleen of social inferiority.

Without some sort of gloss, that last sentence might easily be misconstrued. I do not mean to claim for the “blue blood” immunity from meanesses; or to assert that the guinea-stamp is the best voucher for purity of metal; or to deny that, setting influence of circumstances aside, high and healthy impulses are not as likely to be found in the gipsy-child, swaddled in haybands, as in the daintiest porphyrogete. If the prophecies of the amiable “Historicus” are to be fulfilled, we will wish the working man good luck with his honour; appending thereunto the hope that his right hand will not teach him too terrible things. I was not alluding just now either to the peasant or artisan; much less to those unhappy creatures who seem predestined to ramp in the mire at the foot of the World’s Ladder, with no particular interest in any schemes mooted above that do not bear more or less directly on the subversion of order or alteration of the penal code. Neither had I in mind the vast middle class, taken

as a whole; but only certain specimens thereof—people who, instead of doing their duty in the state of life to which it pleased Heaven to call them, like the honest men who begat them, are always wriggling up a rung higher, utterly careless as to how unsteady their footing may be, or how their hands may be soiled in climbing—people whose aspirations have furnished food for ridicule ever since pencil of caricaturist or pen of satirist was wielded; those who brought into vogue, surely the most odious word that ever sprang from a musical root—"gentility." Mark this too: wherever it is a question of class jealousy, the envy of the plebeian born and bred is the very milk of human kindness compared to the malice of the *parvenu*.

For some time past, Kendall had kept steadily before him one object—the securing a recognised position in what is called Society. In the furtherance of this, there is scarcely any contumely from which he would actually have recoiled: but partial success only made him more keenly alive to slights and repulses; albeit many of these, perhaps, only existed in his own morbid fancy. He was always tormented by the misgiving that his pretty little affectations must seem to others, as well as himself, like sham jewels set side by side with heirlooms. The very type of the set that Horace hated and en-

nor at any future time can it possibly interest me or mine; but, before you think seriously of winning any woman, gentle or simple, wouldn't it be better to consider how you are going to support her? Now, listen to me. There's a certain sum settled on my younger children, of course; but Lady Daventry and myself have the 'power of appointment.' Perhaps you don't know what that means. Well, I can tell you. It means just this: that I can prevent any one of those children from being one shilling the better by that same settlement during my life or after my death. Now this power, in case of need, I intend to exercise to the last letter. If a daughter of mine marries without my consent, she is cut adrift from her family from that day: I would rather thenceforth help with my purse or my influence the merest stranger, than her, her husband, or her children, however sore their strait might be. I shouldn't waste breath in cursing; it would be much simpler to leave her alone to bear her own burdens. Under the circumstances, so long as I lived—and I have a very fair constitution—I don't think the 'connection' could be turned to much account. I can't answer for Lady Daventry, of course; but I have an idea that her feelings would not be easily worked upon. You have heard what I say—speaking for myself. I will never alter or abate one syl-

lable, so help me God! Are you in the same mind still?"

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vied about equally was before him now—languid, self-possessed, thoroughly at ease, and thoroughly determined to abate not an inch of his vantage-ground. Overt insult, or coarse abuse, would have been infinitely easier to endure than the amenities he had just listened to. Kendall vowed to himself that his adversary should not carry the matter quite so smoothly through; nevertheless, he answered with touching humility, after an instant's pause:

“My wishes would never change, even if I were forced to give up hope. Do I understand that you require that Lady Gwendoline and myself should be strangers henceforth—strangers always—and that this can never be altered? It sounds very, very hard; almost too hard.”

The Earl drew himself up ever so slightly, and the fashion of his countenance was changed. Even now there was no anger in his eyes; but the softness had gone out of them utterly.

“Unquestionably you may understand that much,” he said; “but you’ll understand something more before we part. I have been arguing on grounds of expediency so far, as if there were no such things as social distinctions. As the argument don’t seem to be convincing, we’ll take the other side of the question—the kidnapping side. If you suppose for a moment that I’m going to turn that poor child into

a prisoner, or my house into a gaol, to keep her safe from you, you labour under such a mistake as few men make twice in a lifetime. You have ample warning now; it won't be repeated. If, after this, there comes any annoyance from you, directly or indirectly, by word, deed, or letter—more than that, if I hear of your making a good story out of any folly that you may have entrapped her into already—I'll stop it—not by fair means, but by foul. Rather a hard sentence to construe, isn't it? But the right of translation is reserved. We live in the midst of law and order, of course, and the Coventry Act has been a dead letter this long time past; but, if they were communicative down at Scotland Yard, they could tell you one or two curious stories about 'East-ending.' I shall give you no further hints: the unknown is always the most terrible."

Many men, finding themselves in Kendall's position, would have turned the tables at once in their own favour by laughing the menace to scorn; but, by dint of making experiments *in corpore vili*, Lord Daventry had acquired a tolerably sharp insight into the weaker and worse side of human nature. On the present occasion it seemed he had gauged very accurately the character with which he had to deal; and his bolt was not shot at a venture. It was evident that Kendall was thoroughly fright-

ened. His clumsy attempt at bluster would not have imposed on a child.

"I—I'm not to be intimidated," he said in a thick, unsteady voice. "Are you aware, my lord, such threats are actionable?"

"Perfectly aware," the other replied placidly. "You can lay an information if you like; but I doubt if you'll get any magistrate to take it. I've got a reputation for good temper, and I haven't been in a quarrel since I left school. I doubt still more if you came to harm hereafter—if your beauty were spoiled in a street-row, for instance—whether you'd bring me in as accessory before the fact. East-enders are too well paid to peach. I can spare you no more time, I'm sorry to say. You can think over all this at your leisure."

A man bold enough to set the Earl's warning utterly at naught could scarcely have failed to be impressed by the contrast between his *débonnaire* manner and the purport of his words. Truculence would have been infinitely less effective. Such a contrast might have been seen at some of the banquets in the wild old times, where none wore garb more warlike than what is wrought in velvet, miniver, or lawn; but where, if a guest stirred over hastily, an ominous rattle would have been heard,

and gray steel would have glimmered under rochet or robe of estate.

There was an awkward pause. Then Horace spoke with some faint show of spirit; it was like the last melancholy ruffle of the drums when the garrison of a surrendered fortress is forming to march out.

"I have no wish to annoy anyone, or to thrust my company where it is not welcome. I would have said as much five minutes ago. Nothing I have done, my lord, justifies such language as you have seen fit to use. I will pass my solemn word not to communicate in any way with Lady Gwendoline Marston without your knowledge or consent; and I need hardly say that her name shall never suffer through me. I presume this will satisfy you?"

Without going deep into decimals it would be hard to set down the precise value at which the Earl estimated Horace Kendall's word; but he thought he had a more material security against any future breach of the peace than that gentleman's own recognisances; and it had always been his policy to provide the broadest of bridges for a flying foe. "Never pen 'em, if you can help it," he was wont to say. So he answered with edifying gravity, just as if he were accepting the most substantial of guarantees.

"Perfectly satisfied. And now, as we understand each other thoroughly, and I happen to be rather busy to-day, I think I shall wish you a very good-morning."

And once more the Earl lifted his hat. The other returned the salute mechanically without looking up; then he stood quite still, his hands crossed before him, and resting on the handle of his walking-stick. A few seconds later Nina passed him on her father's arm; and her piteous glance was unanswered, even if it was noticed, by those sullen eyes.

"What did you say to him, papa?" the girl asked when they had gone about a hundred yards. "You *will* tell me, I know."

Her lips were very white, but they scarcely trembled at all. She was a thorough Marston; and that family had a knack of taking their punishment quietly, in whatsoever shape it might descend.

"Well, there's very little to tell," the Earl answered in his airy way. "I explained to Mr. Kendall that there must be an end to all this nonsense—utterly an end—and he perfectly agreed with me."

"He—perfectly—agreed—with you?"

The dull heavy syllables dropped out one by one. Then her lips were pressed tightly together;

but she could not keep them from quivering a little now.

Raoul Marston was not devoid of natural affection, though he seldom went out of his way to display it. He felt very sorry for his little daughter, and very loth to add to her pain. It cost him no small effort to answer her cheerily.

"Of course he agreed with me; and so will you, my dear, when your foolish little head gets straight again. I hope it won't be so easily turned in future, or we shall have to send you back to the school-room, and have that last Gorgon of a governess back again. I'm much too old to turn detective, and you're too young to be turned into a prisoner at large. Now, you'll just give me your word that there shall be no further communication between yourself and Mr. Kendall that I don't sanction—it's no more than he has done already—then all this shall rest a secret between you and me. I sha'n't even tell my lady about it."

A real heroine would have avowed herself willing to be incarcerated there and then, and to eat the bread-and-water of affliction indefinitely, rather than resign her heart's desires; but we do not often even read of such in the romances which profess to mirror modern society, and probably neither you nor I ever encountered them in the flesh. Nina Marston was

able and willing to bear up her full share of the burden of the battle; but, now that her natural ally had signed terms of surrender on his own account, she was not minded to fight to the death—alone. It may be, too, that one of the misgivings that she had never been quite able to smother as to the real character of the man for whom she had risked so much, and with such poor return, came back upon her just then. Moreover, you will remember she had come to the trysting-place that morning with the settled purpose of saying “Good-bye.” She looked up bravely in her father’s face.

“Let me write to him—just one little note—that he may not think me cold and cruel; and then I will give you that promise, papa, and keep it too.”

Gwendoline Marston’s parole was a very different thing from Horace Kendall’s. A strong-minded parent would assuredly have rejected that condition: perhaps it rather strengthened Lord Daventry’s confidence.

“I oughtn’t to listen to such a thing,” he said half-grumblingly; “I feel like an accomplice as it is. Well, you may write just that once, and I trust you—do you hear me, Nina?—I trust you not to write a word that either you or I need be ashamed of hereafter; and then all this shall be as if it had never been. But there won’t be an end of it, as

far as I'm concerned, if I see you look pale and moping."

"You needn't fear," she said.

Glancing round first, to see that nobody was near—he was exceeding circumspect in such matters—the Earl stooped and kissed his daughter's brow. If the compact had been duly engrossed, attested, and signed, it could not have been more effectually sealed.

That same evening Nina and Avenel met—in a crowd, of course—but there was space and leisure enough to serve their purpose.

"Well?" Regy asked, lifting those expressive brows of his, which did almost as much service as Burleigh's nod. There was bitterness enough still clinging about the girl's heart to make her feel triumph in being able to defy, at all events, her self-appointed guardian.

"Well?" she retorted. "That means that you want a full and correct account of all my sayings and doings to-day, on pain of being brought before the judgment-seat if I refuse. I do refuse, then; and you can make the best or worst of it."

Avenel was really chagrined, and showed it.

"So you haven't come to your senses yet? And I so hoped you would. I must speak to them at home, then: God knows how I hate it."

He looked so pained that Nina's enmity was disarmed. He had meant kindly by her throughout, after all: she knew that.

"No, I've nothing to tell you, Regy," she said; "but you needn't go to papa nevertheless. He knows everything, or nearly everything; for he came up—quite by chance, I'm certain—when I was talking to *him* this morning. It's all over—quite over. Papa's satisfied about that, so I suppose you'll be. Don't speak of it any more, please; and take me upstairs directly. I wouldn't miss this waltz on any account. I'm just in the humour for dancing to-night. Can't you fancy it?"

And so the first romance of Gwendoline Marston's life died, and was buried—decently, if with no great pomp of funeral honours. Well—when on such sepulchres there is not written

Resurgam.

CHAPTER XXI.

"A THOROUGHLY satisfactory place," said Vere Alsager.

A better epithet could not have been applied to Kenlis Castle and its belongings. There was nothing either of savage grandeur or soft luxuriance in the landscape; but no one would have thought of calling it tame, and it embraced most of the best features of ordinary Scotch scenery. The topmost peak of the long hill-ranges, stretching away till purple faded into misty blue, was far from kissing heaven; yet the travelling of them was no mean test of wind and muscle. The pines in the hanging woods were mere dwarfs, compared with the "shadowy armies" that line Norwegian or Alpine heights; but they made up a rich background, and a fence withal, through which the north-east winds, though they strove hard and often, could not force a passage. The loch, widening gradually as it trended seawards, was scarcely a rifle-shot across, over against the castle; yet its shores were broken by more bays and promontories in miniature than are often found in more imposing lakes; and in calm weather you felt

as if you could almost cut out the shadows of birch and oak resting on the clear, deep water.

—As for the castle itself, no one with proper ideas of comfort would have wished to add a cubit to its size, or a year to its age. Some additions to the original fabric had been made from time to time—always in the same solemn granite, that looks not much more hoary after the lapse of a century than when fresh from the quarrying. However, for two generations, at least, the sound of mason's hammer had not been heard there; and the general aspect of the building was little changed since Sir Dugald Kenlis, with his own hands, fixed the last battlement of the central tower.

After the fall of the leaf, when the trees were bare and the hill-sides bleak, and the loch fretted with foam, the castle would doubtless look somewhat sombre and eerie. At such a season, without some strong antidote to melancholy or morbid fancies, even a strong-minded sceptic might have caught himself speculating, oftener than was agreeable, whether it were absolutely certain that the legend of the Brown Lady was such an idle tale. For Kenlis, be it known, possessed a ghost, the existence and occasional appearance of which could be attested by several living witnesses—chiefly by a certain ancient ex-housekeeper, who, in a cottage

just without the demesne wall, lived in much ease and dignity on her pension and peculations. A pitiless Presbyterian was this ancient dame, and—on the principle of truth being generally disagreeable—implicitly to be believed.

But, with autumn weather overhead, and wealth of greenery all round, there was no excuse for such vain imaginings; and there was justice in Blanche Ramsay's self-reproaches when she called herself ungrateful and fanciful, and a dozen harder names, for feeling so constantly out of spirits there. Her first impressions of the place had been most favourable; and these, to a certain extent, had not worn off. She liked water, and wood, and heather, to the full as well as when she looked on them first, and while in the air she was happy enough in her own quiet way; but directly she came indoors a heavy weight seemed to oppress her that she could not shake off, try as she would. She began to feel dull and chilly, and disinclined to talk or even to move unnecessarily.

Very clever upholsterers, with *carte blanche* given them, had refurnished the castle, and few appliances of modern luxury were wanting there; nevertheless, the interior was certainly somewhat gloomy. After sunset, even at this season, Night and Echo would have their way in the long cor-

ridors, in despite of frequent sconces and thick piled carpeting; and, when not a leaf was stirring outside, a breeze seemed always souging among the black timberwork of the vaulted hall. Yet this could not account for it; for her own special rooms, looking to the south, were airy and lightsome as she could desire, and she felt it there just the same. To be sure, all her arrangements hitherto had been on rather a tiny scale; and, when she first began to play the *châtelaine*, it was only natural that she should feel somewhat over-awed. Domestic cares or anxieties she had none; for Ramsay had no small economies, and would just as soon have thought of brushing his own clothes, as of allowing his wife to trouble herself with any matters falling within the house-steward's or housekeeper's province. Perhaps it might have been better if Blanche had been forced to exert herself in some way that would have kept her thoughts busy whilst she was alone: she was a good deal alone at first, for business, chiefly connected with outlying portions of the estate, had accumulated during Mark's long absence; and during the week following their arrival at Kenlis, he was seldom indoors between breakfast and dinner.

On one of these afternoons, Blanche strolled down to the loch-side, and nestled herself, with her novel, into a certain cosy nook that she had

discovered in one of her earliest rambles. There she sat, reading and day-dreaming in about equal proportions—for the book rather bored her than otherwise—till she was startled by a rustling in the birch-boughs overhead that could not have been caused by the breeze, for the water at her feet was smooth as steel. Before she could look up, Mark had swung himself down from a jutting crag above, and dropped lightly on the sand beside her.

“So this is your notion of doing the honours of Kenlis, Bianchetta? Don't you know that you ought to be sitting up there in state to receive visitors? These are the very first that have called since we came into our kingdom. I've no doubt the worthy creatures came famishing with curiosity to see what Mrs. Ramsay was like; and lo, they are sent empty away!”

He threw a couple of cards into her lap, whereon was inscribed

CAPTAIN IRVING.

MISS IRVING.

Drumour.

“I'm a true penitent,” Blanche said. “If you'll believe me, the possibility of a morning visit never once crossed my mind. Conceive there being a

neighbourhood somewhere beyond our hills! I wonder what these people are like, Mark; the name sounds rather nice, doesn't it?"

"Don't found pleasant conclusions on that," Ramsay said with a laugh, as he settled himself on the rocky ledge on which his wife was reclining. "I know nothing about the Irvings—I've a sort of notion they were away when I was here last autumn; at all events, they didn't deign to notice graceless grouse-shooters—but I daresay my fancy portrait won't be half a bad likeness. The father—a regular half-pay 'heavy,' with an ancient War-Office grievance, always ready to be brought in when he has said his say about Kirk and Session—shoots with one muzzle-loader over slow setters; and won't allow that anyone but himself can tie a fly. The daughter—or sister, as the case may be—of the 'bitter barmaid' type, gaunt and rather grim, wears good serviceable boots and a tartan petticoat, and writes short tales with long morals for Family Journals. Before you have been ten minutes in her company, she will find out something about your 'state of grace,' Blanche, depend upon it."

Mrs. Ramsay shuddered slightly.

"And you call that portrait-painting? I wonder what your caricatures would be like. Now, I've no doubt that they are just what you said at first—

very worthy creatures. It was a great stretch of charity to drive out at all on such a sultry afternoon. We shall appreciate it better when we return their visit, I daresay."

"I rather admire that 'we.' Is it absolutely necessary that I should take part in the ceremony? I think I must stay at home and look after Alsager, who comes to-night, you know. It wouldn't be civil to leave him to his own devices quite so soon."

"How truly considerate!" Blanche said demurely. "It's quite refreshing in these selfish days to find anyone so alive to hospitable duties. Now I think that both you and Mr. Alsager, if you made a great effort, might possibly survive the pilgrimage to Drumour. If you can't, I think I shall defer mine till the Brancepeths come next week. I'd give anything to hear Queenie questioned as to her state of grace."

"Well, we'll see about it," Mark replied, picking himself up leisurely. "I haven't the slightest doubt, when it comes to the point, you'll manage it your own way. Suppose we stroll slowly home; it's too hot to hurry, and it must be close on dressing-time. These long rides give one a savage appetite, and Isidor's *entrées* are too clever to be kept waiting."

It was on the following morning that Alsager made the remark recorded above, whilst he and his host were smoking the after-breakfast cigar on the

broad terrace-walk that ran along all the western and southern sides of the castle.

"Yes, it's a liveable place enough," Ramsay acquiesced; "but I'm happy to say there's plenty of room for improvement still. I don't seem to care for things that are absolutely perfect."

"No, I shouldn't think you did," the other retorted. "You're not exactly a 'character,' Mark; but I never saw anyone quite like you, all the same. Now, if I'd been making both ends of a pittance meet, so long—that's just what a thousand a-year is to a man of your tastes and habits—and found myself one fine morning a Carabas, I couldn't for the life of me take it so coolly as you do. I think I should always be calling my neighbours to rejoice with me, or making myself ridiculous in one way or other, for at least another twelvemonth to come."

"The neighbours come without being called—at least, a couple of them have," Mark said; "I'll tell you about that presently, though. But you are wrong there; I don't take what's happened all as a matter of course: indeed, I wonder at it as much as I can wonder at anything."

"Ah, it never rains but it pours!" the other went on. "I'm not at all sure that your last stroke of luck wasn't as good as the first. You don't think I'd flatter you at this time of day; but I don't

know when I've seen anything so nice as Mrs. Ramsay. You ought to be too happy, Mark, that's the truth of it. If I were you, I'd contrive to drop something very valuable into the loch occasionally, on that Greek tyrant's principle of throwing a sop to Fortune."

"Polycrates, you mean. It wasn't such a very bright idea either. They crucified him soon afterwards—served him quite right too, for fancying that he could satisfy the envy of gods with a jeweller's toy. What would you have me throw away, Vere? Not my wife, I presume? She's about the only portable treasure I should care very much about losing—just now."

Alsager was not more malicious or envious than his fellows; nevertheless, as he repeated the last words to himself, he laughed a little, inwardly. While the world lasts, he whose garden is barren of herb, fruit, or flower, will not seldom console himself with the thought that a canker-worm may be coiled round the root of his neighbour's gourd.

"You were mentioning some neighbours just now," Vere asked, after smoking silently a minute or two; "what of them?"

"Well, a Captain and Miss Irving left their cards yesterday, and it's a question of returning their call. Morning-visits in desert-life are too ab-

surd; but Blanche is so plaintive about going alone, that I hardly like to send her. She's cruelly out of her element with stiff, uncouth people, such as these are certain to turn out. Would you mind very much going over to-morrow afternoon? We can make up a scratch team for the break; and, as they want putting together, they'd just suit you. It's a fair, hard road, I believe, and goes through some good scenery."

"I don't want bribing," the other said; "I rather like the idea than not. How do you know that these are such rough diamonds? The country is fairly civilised hereabouts, and the name don't sound uncouthly. There was an Irving made a great stir in Florence just before our time. Though domestic duties are very elastic out there, I don't think he *could* have been a family man. To be sure 'Miss' stands for sister as well as daughter; but it's long odds against its being the same. We'll see Mrs. Ramsay through it to-morrow, anyhow. We shall have a rare sail this evening if the breeze holds—a leading wind both ways—and we're sure to pick up something, 'trailing.'"

The drive next day quite answered Ramsay's warranty. The ground was not such as most people would have selected for the trial of a scratch team; but Alsager was a thorough workman, of the "fast"

school. He hustled his horses too much, some critics said; but he never let them get out of his hand. Even the stubborn near leader was fain to realise at last that he had not come out for his own amusement that day; and settled down doggedly to his collar up the last steep slope, in the valley beyond which lay Drumour.

An exclamation of pleased surprise broke from Mrs. Ramsay as they rose the crest of the hill.

"Do pull up for an instant, if it's possible, Mr. Alsager; "I didn't reckon on such a view as this."

"Nothing easier," Vere said, as he brought his team up with a long, steady pull; "they'll be all the better for a breathing. That's worth looking at, certainly."

It was one of the bits of scenery not uncommon in Scotland—which, lying out of the beaten track, are better known to stalkers than to tourists—where Nature has shown what she can do when she sets her hand in earnest to landscape-gardening. It would not have been easy to improve on the grouping of cliff, wood, and water at Drumour; though everything was on a miniature scale—from the loch, that looked as if no gust had ever ruffled it rudely, to the velvet lawn, on which a few gorgeous flower-beds lay like jewels. The house itself was in per-

fect keeping with the rest—a low, irregular building, abounding in nooks and gables, and mantled in creepers to the base of its quaint, twisted chimneys.

“Do half-pay officers usually live in such quarters, Mark?” Mrs. Ramsay asked rather triumphantly. And her husband was fain to confess that his fancy portrait might not turn out such a faithful one.

A few minutes later they had drawn up before the porch, and had been informed by a very correct-looking man-servant that Miss Irving was at home, and her father within call. Blanche’s own boudoir at Kenlis was not more dainty to look upon than the drawing-room into which the visitors were shown; yet the furniture was not specially costly; and, setting aside some rare china, the nicknacks scattered about were more valuable for their workmanship than for their material. And the mistress thereof—was she of the “bitter barmaid” type? You shall judge.

A tall, very tall figure, and superbly developed; yet so supple and delicately moulded, that even a rival would not have ventured to speak of it as “fine;” glossy nut-brown hair, rippling low over a broad Egyptian forehead; gray opaline eyes, rather deeply set under strong arched brows, shaded by lashes much darker than the hair; a mouth too large to please an artist, but to ordinary mortals, with its

firm scarlet lips, and teeth faultless in shape and colour, tempting past the telling; features of the subdued aquiline; a complexion pale on the surface, with subtle, faint rose-tints beneath, when you looked more narrowly. Such was the *signalement* of Alice Irving, *æt.* 22.

In the fashion of her dress there was nothing apparently beyond the scope of ordinary waiting-maid's skill; but I doubt if the high priest of the fashionable temple in the Street of Peace, after an hour's devout meditation, could have ordained anything more suggestive than the modest *foulard*, which might have been chosen to match her eyes. Her beauty was of that peculiar stamp which is certain to provoke enmity and envy, howsoever meekly it be used; simply because other types, differing ever so much betwixt themselves, suffer almost equally in comparison. Unluckily, it happens that women endowed with this perilous preëminence seldom do use it wisely or well. Nothing could be quieter than her voice and manner; but, before her few simple words of welcome were spoken, Alsager, whose ears seldom deceived him, thought within himself that it would be worth walking more miles than they had driven to hear that woman sing.

Mrs. Ramsay, whose presence of mind was equal to most social emergencies, was fairly startled by

the apparition. She thought, perhaps, like Christabel in the wood,

'Twas fearful there to see
A lady richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly.

Mark himself took the whole thing in his wonted matter-of-course way, and did not even answer a meaning side-glance from Alsager.

"Yes, Drumour is charming, even in winter," Miss Irving said, in answer to an admiring remark of Blanche's; "at least, I find it so; but at this season everyone is fascinated with it. I have seen little of it lately: we've been abroad the last four years, and the place was let."

"Travelling abroad?" Mark struck in. "I have been such a wanderer myself, that it is strange we have never met. We never did meet, I'm quite sure."

A faint smile showed that the subtle flattery of the last words was not lost upon Alice Irving.

"Not so strange," she said, "when you hear that our head-quarters were at Darmstadt, and that I, at least, was almost always a fixture there. It's not an out-of-the-way place, certainly, and birds of passage often perch there for a single night; but I can hardly conceive anyone lingering longer, without strong and sufficient reasons, such as ours were.

Everything and everybody is so deadly-lively, from the Grand Duke downwards; and when one gets thoroughly torpid, even Shakespeare in German won't wake one up."

"Well, I trust you are quite established here now," Mrs. Ramsay said kindly; "and that's not a very disinterested hope. Kenlis can't have many such neighbours, and within such easy distance too; the drive is a mere nothing."

"I'm sure I hope so," Alice answered; "but we're the most uncertain people. I think papa rather piques himself on making no plans beyond the week. Ah, here he comes; he will be so glad not to have missed you!"

There was little, if any, family likeness betwixt father and daughter. Captain Irving's figure was wonderfully proportioned, and his features nearly faultless; but it was diminutive perfection, and the general effeminacy of his appearance was heightened by an evident coxcombry of attire. He was the sort of man that you could fancy, in case of shipwreck, appearing without a trace of disorder half an hour after he had been cast on a desert shore. He doffed a broad-leafed hat of Panama straw as he entered through one of the open French windows; and, as he crossed the light, it was plain to see that either Time

had dealt very gently with his glossy curls, or that Art had balked the old Avenger.

If there was little outward resemblance betwixt father and daughter, their voices, at least, were remarkably alike. Both had the same rich flexible intonations; and you could fancy Captain Irving's white taper fingers straying over the keys of an instrument, and working wonderful things thereon. His manner was very quiet and gentle, though there was no lack of warmth in his welcome; and he settled himself down by Mrs. Ramsay, with the matter-of-course ease of a man who, rightly or wrongly, considers he has a prescriptive right to the attention of pretty women.

Altogether, it was a pleasant quintette; and the conversation, such as it was, did not flag a whit, till it was full time to order the break round.

"I suppose it's no use asking you to shoot with us just yet?" Mark said to his host as he rose to depart. "A man's own birds have the first claim on him for a good week after the Twelfth. But we shall be too happy, whenever you can spare a day—or, better still, two days—sleeping at Kenlis, of course; and perhaps Miss Irving might be tempted to accompany you."

"A thousand thanks," the other answered. "I should like it of all things; but—it's a very humiliat-

ing confession—I haven't fired a shot-gun for years. A little feeble fly-fishing is my best attempt at fulfilling the Whole Duty of a Hielandman; and all my ground, except one beat that supplies the house, is let. I'll drive Alice over one morning, though, in time to escort Mrs. Ramsay, if she chooses, to meet you at lunch. Those are the only circumstances under which I ever take the hill. We'll stay that night with pleasure. How time passes! I was an ensign and lieutenant when I slept at Kenlis last."

And so it was settled.

A vote of confidence in Drumour and its tenants was passed unanimously by the committee of three sitting in the break; but the homeward was more silent than the outward drive had been; and before the hanging woods of Kenlis were in sight, one of those fits of depression that had vexed and puzzled her so much of late began to creep over Blanche Ramsay. They would not have seemed so unaccountable, if she had thoroughly believed in presentiments. But her life hitherto had been so free from storms that she had not learned to read the meaning of the innocent-looking white flecks in a cloudless sky; and had never been forced to realise, that a small inner voice oftentimes speaks more soothly than all the prophets that, since the time of the Tishbite, have threatened "Woe!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE men were scarcely alone together till they settled down to their evening smoke. Then said Alsager:

"It's the Florentine celebrity, after all, you may depend upon it. 'Never shoots with a shot-gun'—that's likely enough; but I daresay he could give either you or me a lesson with hair-triggers. His pistol-practice used to be something miraculous, if I remember right; and it pulled him through one or two awkward dilemmas. It's an agreeable surprise altogether, isn't it?"

"Very agreeable, particularly if the rest of the neighbourhood comes up to the first sample. That isn't likely, though. I've seen the father before—it's a sort of face that dwells on one's memory; it was at Baden, three years ago; he was playing fearfully high, with the luck dead against him. Navaroff used to point him out, as the only Englishman who could lose in real Russian fashion. I quite understand their living at Darmstadt now: it's within hail of every hell in Germany."

"How about the daughter's face? Don't you

think *that* would be likely to stay by one too? There has been, or will be, the framework of a sensation-piece in that young woman's history, unless I'm much mistaken."

"Too thoroughbred for the stage, I should say," the other answered; "and Darmstadt isn't exactly a dramatic place. It's odd that she hasn't married, though."

"Odder still that she should not have got into some scrape of one sort or another. There's a quiet devilry in those eyes that ought to take her far."

Ramsay shrugged his shoulders somewhat impatiently.

"I'm not going to argue the point. You're a scientific oculist, Vere; but even science is wrong sometimes. I can see nothing in Miss Irving but a highly ornamental young person, likely to make a pleasant companion for Blanche whenever we're alone here.

"*That* of course," Alsager said with his low laugh—"a perfect godsend for Mrs. Ramsay in every way."

And all the while he thought within himself, half-compassionately, that it would have been better for his hostess, a thousandfold, to have found at Drumour a hard-featured, harsh-voiced virago than such an one as Alice Irving.

Two days later, the Kenlis party was completed for the present by the advent of three fresh guests—the Brancepeths and Colonel Vane; and the following morning, being the Feast of S. Tetrao, four guns were at work betimes, pairing off on separate beats. Mr. Brancepeth was a steady, methodical performer; but could not stand being hurried or flurried; and, setting jealousy aside, had a wholesome horror of long-striding companions, like Alsager and Vane. With his host he felt a comfortable certainty of being allowed to go his own pace and pick his own shots; for Ramsay, like many others who have gone in heavily for the big game, was by no means keen in the pursuit of feathered fowl, though he shot in remarkably good form. When they ceased firing, the leisurely couple were found to have contributed rather more than their quota to a fair mixed bag of over two hundred head.

There was no luncheon-party that first day; for La Reine Gaillarde was just tired enough by her long journey to incline rather to a quiet lionising of Blanche's new home than to the climbing of a hillside on pony-back, even with the chance of seeing a certain stalwart figure standing in relief against the skyline. She and Vane were ancient acquaintances, and might have been familiar friends—to put it mildly—if in those days the colonel of the Prin-

cess's Own had had eyes or ears for the service of any but Mrs. Ellerslie. It was not in Laura Brancepeth to bear malice, much less to pine over any discomfiture; especially if, as in this case, she had never seriously addressed herself to the conquest. Certainly, she had no need to go out into the highways and byways to recruit the ranks of her adherents. Nevertheless her black eyes flashed with pleasure when she heard, on her arrival, who was expected hourly. Vereker was about the last person she had reckoned on meeting at Kenlis, at least so soon. Of one thing she felt sure—that Mark had invited him there, and was thoroughly safe in doing so; and further, that if Vane should show signs of better taste than heretofore, Blanche would not be likely to interfere with their innocent amusements.

There was a good deal worth looking at within doors at Kenlis Castle; but before luncheon Laura Brancepeth had rambled through the whole of it alone, and had penetrated into more passages and recesses than Blanche herself had ever discovered. After luncheon, the two women loitered together through the gardens and wood-paths beyond, till they ensconced themselves at last in that tempting nook by the loch-side whereof mention has before been made.

"I declare it's the most perfect place I ever

saw," La Reine said in her hearty, genuine way. "This is only the second time I've been over the Border, it is true; but I don't think it could be matched in Scotland. Blanche, don't you love it already?"

"Yes; it's quite charming," Blanche answered, after a second's hesitation; "and I like it, of course—who could help liking it? But somehow I don't think it quite suits me, Queenie. You can't imagine how languid and depressed I've felt at times—particularly when I'm alone. I've been a good deal alone since we came down. There were an infinity of things for Mark to look into all over the estate; and there's a terrible creature—a factor they call him—who won't be denied. Perhaps the air is rather too relaxing."

"Absurd," the other retorted. "The air's simply faultless. It has given me a fabulous appetite already."

Even while she spoke a light breeze ruffled the bright water at their feet; and the veriest hypochondriac must have acknowledged gratefully the briny freshness it brought from the open sea.

"Mark says just the same thing," Mrs. Ramsay answered with a slight sigh; "and you are both right, I'm certain. I haven't an excuse for moping either, now you're come: indeed, I feel ever so much

better since yesterday. We'll take their lunch out to the hill to-morrow. There are plenty of available ponies, and you'll enjoy the scramble. I shouldn't wonder if the Irvings drove over in time to go with us. They're our nearest neighbours—the only ones, indeed, that have given signs of their existence—quite a *trouvaille* in such a wild country. The father looks like a statuette of white Dresden, and the daughter— Well, I won't describe her, Queenie; but I think you *will* be surprised."

"O, I do hope they'll come," Lady Laura said eagerly. "Fancy lighting on a pair of Phoenixes so far north! It's a wonder that none of you mentioned the female bird, at all events, sooner."

"I had so many things to talk about, I suppose," Mrs. Ramsay said, blushing a little. "It's dangerous to rest too much on first impressions; but I wish I was as sure of fine weather to-morrow, as I am of your being just as favourably impressed with the Drumour people as we were."

Then they fell to talking of other matters, interesting to themselves, but of no moment to the world in general.

The next day was one of those that Scotland occasionally produces, to confute the sulky Southrons who assert that "there's no climate there, only d—d bad weather." The air was so clear, that with

a good glass you might almost have counted the heather-sprays where they cut the sky-line. There was just breeze enough from the north-west to prevent sultriness and to help the setters, without any of the gusts or flaws that make the packs lie uneasily and carry them when once on the wing far out of bounds. There was firing enough to satisfy a glutton on both beats that morning; and the luck or skill on either side was so nearly level, that no man's appetite was spoiled either by self-upbraiding or envy of his fellow. Alsager halted for a second on the crest overlooking the hollow where lunch was already preparing—the other party were half-way down the opposite brae.

"Drumour is to the front, you see" (there had been speculation on this point the previous evening). "I wish we had a photographer here—with a painter's eye, of course, to throw in colour afterwards."

In truth, the group beneath them was worth reproducing. The rich heather—crimson rather than purple just here—toned down, instead of contrasting with, the bright hues of the kirtles, peeping out below upper skirts kilted *à la* Lindsay. The soberer tints were supplied by the plaids on which the women reclined, and the neutral gray of Captain Irving's shooting suit. He leant against a

rock a little in the background, in precisely the attitude that a sculptor would have chosen as best adapted to display the points of his slight, graceful figure.

The luncheon, of course, was a success, for—putting the Irvings aside, who evidently came determined to be pleased—everybody had more or less sufficient reason for being in special good-humour. To begin with—seventy brace of clean-killed birds, with scarcely a cheeper amongst them, is a fair forenoon's work for men shooting for their own amusement, with no idea of newspaper renown or the puffing of their moor. Mr. Brancepeth, having differed in opinion from the head-keeper as to the best way of beating the ground, had not only carried his point, but afterwards proved himself to be thoroughly in the right, to the conviction, if not satisfaction, even of the stubborn official. Lady Laura, after some sharp *badinage* at breakfast, had backed Alsager against Vane for a fair stake in gloves; and was now rejoicing over having landed her bet by the very short head of a single bird. Her champion to a certain extent went shares in the triumph. As for Vereker, he was thinking how much pleasanter it was to lose in this fashion than to win—even with the probability of being paid—at Vincennes or La Marche, and how differently

sounded Laura Brancepeth's healthy merriment from a certain hard, cruel laugh that he hoped to hear never again.

The last two months had wrought a wonderful change in him, outwardly no less than inwardly. At his worst he had never altogether lost his taste for the field-sports among which he had been born and bred; and he came back to them now with a keener zest than ever. His face would never look otherwise now than battered and worn; but the haggard fierceness which had deformed it was there no longer; and it was now quite possible to believe that those who had known him long ago had not overrated his personal advantages. In many respects he had waxed wiser of late, notably in this one. He could eat of Mark Ramsay's bread and salt with a clear conscience; for he coveted his wife no more. On that night at the Bouffes there was worked a cure—sharp, complete, and lasting. The ex-draagoon's code of morality was rather vague; but he had his own notions concerning equity notwithstanding. He felt, somehow, that the Ramsays had held out their hands to help him shorewards, when others would have passed by and left him wallowing in the slough; and, since then, the idea of troubling their domestic peace had never once crossed his mind. He stood, quite firm, on the friendly footing now.

When passion, such as his, is once slain outright, it passes the skill of sorcery itself to put life again into the evil dead.

Blanche herself was perhaps in better spirits that morning than she had been since she lunched under the sandstone rocks of Fontainebleau. The keen, pure mountain air had produced a tonic effect already. Also she felt somewhat elated at having accomplished a formidable feat successfully; for she was a timid horsewoman, and, though she kept her tremors to herself, had seen great fear in the beginning of the ascent. But misgiving lapsed gradually into implicit confidence in the sure-footed beast that bore her; she began to think that it was not so absolutely necessary she should always stay moping at home when her husband rode over the hill; and this in itself was enough to make her happy.

The special cause of Mark's contentment would not be so easy to define; but that he was satisfied with the general aspect of things was very clear. From his welcome of the Irvings, you would scarcely have guessed that their acquaintance was but four days old.

Altogether a cheerier repast is not often partaken of; and an hour was nearly up before Mr. Brancepeth—who in his amusements never lost sight of a stern sense of duty—thought of looking at his watch meaningly.

"Yes, you're quite right to call 'Time,'" Ramsay said, answering the other's glance of appeal; "but it so happens that we needn't hurry. Cameron wants us to try a drive, you know. Some of the men are left back with the flags; but it'll take him nearly half an hour to get his beaters in line. He has shown me where to post the guns; it won't take us ten minutes to get there."

"How lucky!" Lady Laura cried; "it's the very thing I wanted to see. I'd rather look at a partridge-drive than a 'hot corner' any day; and this must be twice as exciting. We sha'n't be in your way, Mr. Ramsay, if we sit where we are told as still as mice. Henry will go bail for my good behaviour, I know."

Mr. Brancepeth smiled sedately.

"You couldn't be very mouse-like under any circumstances, I'm afraid, Laura; but I've never yet seen you spoil sport."

"You won't be the least in the way," Mark answered; "indeed, to speak the truth, the drive was organised as much for your amusement as for ours. It isn't a long pull either up to the stand; though it's rather steep in places."

"Beyond Punch's powers, I'm afraid," Blanche interrupted, "and so beyond mine. I never intend to part company; I don't feel safe anywhere on the

hill, as yet, off his back. As for Queenie, she's a perfect Anne of Geierstein; and I think Miss Irving is nearly as brave."

"I've quite forgotten my mountaineering," Alice said; "but I'm not in the least tired, and I own I should like to see the drive; yet it seems so selfish to leave you here alone. Perhaps you won't be alone though; for, as far as I can see, papa looks too comfortable to move just yet."

"Infinitely too comfortable, my child," Captain Irving said serenely. "I wouldn't climb a hundred feet higher to see a drive of golden eagles. I can't promise to amuse Mrs. Ramsay; but I promise to take all care of her till you return: I suppose nothing more terrible than a hill-fox is likely to come near us."

The rest of the party set off, making for the head of the hollow. It was a steep and broken ascent, but nowhere an absolute escalade; and—with the exception of Mr. Brancepeth, who plodded onwards slowly and soberly, taking a line of his own—not one of the climbers was fairly out of breath when they reached a broad neck of tableland, with higher ground on either side, about the centre of which the guns were to be posted. There had been built across here a rude stone wall, about breast-high, with loopholes through which the birds

could be marked some sixty yards ahead. When the four men had aligned themselves under this at regular distances, they nearly covered the pass. Brancepeth and Vane had the midmost stands, and to the latter of these went La Reine Gaillarde. She was going double or quits of all her winnings on the event of this drive, and chose, she said, to see with her own eyes that the Colonel shot fair, without claiming other people's birds. The *demoiselle* seemed to be hesitating under whose protection she should place herself, when Ramsay said—

“Will you come to my stand, Miss Irving? You won't see such good practice as if you were in Alsager's, for my hand is rather out for this work; but I suppose I'm morally responsible for your safety till I bring you back to your father.”

Judging from Alice's face, the arrangement seemed to her also the most natural one. Neither did Vere Alsager look a whit discontented, as he moved away to his post; indeed, he laughed a little, as he muttered to himself—

“Moral responsibility!—That's rather a neat way of putting it. There's no story in those eyes, is there, Mark? I wonder if you'll say as much to-morrow. It must have come sooner or later; but it's hard lines on the other—that it should come so soon—d—d hard!”

And Vere bit off the end of a cigar with vicious emphasis; but a minute later he was smoking tranquilly, and listening with all his ears for the first "Mark over."

"You needn't be a mouse just yet," Ramsay said, as his companion seated herself on a broad flat stone; "the beaters can hardly have got round. And this is your first experience of grouse-driving, I believe?"

"My first of any kind of shooting. I've never yet been close to a gun when it was fired: so if I start you must not be too scandalised. I'll promise not to scream."

"No, you won't scream," he said. "I fancy your nerves don't often fail you. It'll be rather deafening at first, I'm afraid; but you'll soon 'get steady under fire.'"

"One soon gets used to most things," she said with an odd sort of smile. And then there was silence; for a shout, barely audible, gave warning that the drive had begun.

A few seconds later, even Alice's inexperienced ears caught a whirr and whistle of wings.

"They're coming our line," Mark whispered, peering through his loophole. "Shall I shoot this time?"

Her eyes flashed eagerly.

"Shoot? Of course! How can you ask me?"

Eleven grouse came sailing low over the neck, right before the wind, scarcely swaying their pinions, though they were at top speed. When they were within fifty yards or so, Mark showed his head and shoulders over the wall. The wary old cock who led the pack, having no time to swerve, towered upwards with a startled cry; but the best part of an ounce of No. 5 breasted him as he rose, and he left his life in the air, though the impetus of flight carried him within a fathom of the wall. Mark was equally lucky with his second barrel—an easy cross-shot to the left.

"A good beginning," he said, smiling—not so much at his own success as at his companion's satisfaction, for Alice fairly clapped her hands in triumph—"and you never even started, I do believe."

"No; I—I forgot to be frightened," she said half-penitently.

"Well, mind you don't remember it next time. There are more coming; but to the centre guns. Ah! I think Lady Laura is not quite so mouse-like as—you are. I've no doubt she's accountable for Vane's only getting one barrel in, and that when they had passed him."

For some moments afterwards, and indeed till

the beaters came up, the firing was so sharp all along the line that there was no leisure for talking. Out of twenty-six grouse gathered there and then, besides three more stone dead just below the brow, Alsager—as Ramsay had predicted—claimed the largest share. So La Reine landed her *paroli*, though Vane submitted with a laughing protest.

“I do admire your idea of ‘seeing fair,’ Lady Laura. How on earth do you expect a man to shoot, when someone always offers to back the bird just as he’s covering it? It’s much more nervous work than standing opposite the pigeon-traps with the Ring behind you.”

“You’re very ungrateful,” she retorted; “you ought to thank me for furnishing you with excuses for all those misses. Pearl-grays, six and three-quarters, mind; and I have a weakness for Mel-notte.”

“Well, I suppose I’d better pay and look pleasant,” the Colonel said resignedly. “I only hope I shall live to see them worn out; but I decline to plunge any more.”

Then they descended again into the hollow, where Mrs. Ramsay and Irving were reclining contentedly; and the non-shooting members of the luncheon-party started off homewards. Mark looked after them rather wistfully. If he had followed his

own inclination, he certainly would have struck work there and then; but he had a certain conscience in these matters, and felt himself bound to see Mr. Brancepeth through the day. That methodical person had a great horror of any alteration in the programme; and would have considered himself more than shabbily treated, if he had been left to finish their appointed beat alone.

"What do you think of them, Queenie?" Mrs. Ramsay asked, as the two women came downstairs together after changing their walking-dress. "Are they not quite as clever and agreeable as you expected?"

"Rather more so," the other replied; "but I'm not quite so wrapped up in them as you all seem to be. I don't know how it is, but I can't look at either of them without thinking of the old Scotch proverb, 'Fair and false.' There's too much gloss about the father quite to please me; and the daughter—handsome as a picture, I admit—is rather too much like one's idea of Cleopatra."

"Don't be cynical," Blanche interrupted; "it isn't like you. I daresay they are just as honest as humdrum people, though they have much more to say for themselves. I was quite sorry when you all came back this afternoon. You have no idea how amusing Captain Irving can be when he chooses."

"Well, you'd better go on with the flirtation," La Reine rejoined; "meanwhile I'll submit to be fascinated by the Signorina."

Fascinated Lady Laura was not; but, before dressing-time came, she accused herself more than once of lack of charity in her first impressions of Alice Irving.

It was in the evening, however, that Drumour achieved its crowning success. All the Kenlis party were more or less musically inclined; though perhaps only Alsager was thoroughly able to appreciate the vocal powers of the father and daughter. One duet, especially, roused Mr. Brancepeth himself into something like enthusiasm. The great drawing-room was a trying place for singing; but their voices, single or blended, seemed to fill it without an effort or the straining of a note; and a marvellous softness pervaded the rich volume of sound. Lady Laura and Vane were as vehement in their admiration as Blanche herself could desire; and Alsager—himself no mean performer, and quite aware of the fact—did homage, in his own fashion, to superior talent; for, though he never left the piano after the Irvings came to it, he could not himself be prevailed upon to utter a note. During all the singing, Mark sate a little apart, shading his face with his hand; and, when it was over, paid his acknowledgments in

courteous commonplaces. But their glances met for two seconds—no more—as he wished Alice good-night; and the lady's rest was broken by no misgivings as to the completeness of her triumph. She had been complimented on her voice, ere now, by those whose favourable verdict carried with it fame; but Ramsay's look flattered her as she had never been flattered before.

There are vanities and vanities, you see. Even in her failings, Alice might have boasted—without any special cause for thankfulness—that she was not as other women.

The smoking-room held four that night; for Mr. Brancepeth, living by rule, seldom allowed his feet to stray into such unhallowed places. As for Captain Irving—he “never touched tobacco,” he said; “but, keeping regularly late hours, did not choose to risk his night's rest by seeking it too early.” Before long the conversation turned upon play, *apropos* of some recent Parisian scandal.

“I've given up heavy wagering,” Irving said; “or rather, it's given me up. But, I own, I've missed my piquet dreadfully since I've settled down here. I could have taught Alice, for she's quick enough to learn anything; but I'm too old to play for love. I don't think I should ever have left Darmstadt if Bernsdorff hadn't died. You never

knew him, I daresay. He had a perfect passion for the game; and he won two hundred points of me—we played the Russian rules—within twenty-four hours of his end. He was the Grand Duke's favourite chamberlain, and a great loss to society in every way; but I doubt if anyone regretted him as much as I did. I've never slept 'on both ears' since. I should be quite happy at Drumour if I had my *parti*."

"Then I hope you'll be tempted to come oftener to Kenlis," Mark answered, ringing the bell at his elbow; "you'll always find it here; and the least we can do is to try to amuse you, after the treat you gave us this evening. It's my favourite game, and I used to fancy myself at it: I've no doubt you'll take the conceit out of me."

To Alsager, the change on Irving's face was quite a study; and Vane too—not near so keen a physiognomist—remarked on it afterwards. Listless langour had given place to hungry eagerness; yet, to do the man justice, it was not the eagerness of greed, but rather that of the thoroughpaced gambler, to whom losing at play is the second pleasure in life. Not less strange was it to mark how, by mere force of habit, while the cards were being dealt, his face settled down again into statuesque calmness—only the eyes glittered still.

The match, to all outward appearances, was so even as would have interested both, if they had been playing for stamps instead of sovereigns. It was only a run of luck just at last, that brought off Mark the winner of the odd game.

"I'm not a Cræsus," Captain Irving observed, as he opened his purse; "but I should not grudge losing *that*, every night for a week to come. You play, I think, a shade better than Bernsdorff."

The other shook his head.

"I doubt if I could quite hold my own in the long-run; though I do think, between us, it's very much a question of cards."

"I hope he will sleep well," Mark observed, as the door closed behind Captain Irving. "That estimable person has ministered more to my amusement to-night than anyone has done for years past; I'm rather tired, though. What do you say to a regular driving day to-morrow? The women would like it."

"Two of them would, no doubt," Alsager answered, "and I daresay Mrs. Ramsay wouldn't mind. So the 'moral responsibility' wasn't too much for you to-day, Mark? I'm glad of that. Considering how short a time you've been head of a household, you take pretty kindly to your burdens. What an

organ she has, though! I quite forget to look at the woman, in listening to the voice."

"Ah! you're a *fanatico*," Mark said, not noticing the thrust at himself; "that makes all the difference. Good-night, and musical dreams."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE women certainly *did* like it, when the programme for the day was propounded at breakfast. The ground to be driven lay nearly opposite the castle, on the other side of the loch, and it was easily to be reached by the help of the ponies sent round to await them on the farther shore. Nevertheless, Captain Irving elected to stay at home, declaring himself not equal even to that exertion. He had rather better health than the majority of his compeers; but his *maladif* appearance was always a convenient excuse for laziness. The weather was perfect again; and, before noon, the guns, with the fair spirits, their ministers, were duly posted under stands built up of turf and heather. Two of the pairs were the same as yesterday: Mrs. Ramsay was under Alsager's charge.

"It rather went against my conscience to leave your father at home alone," Mark observed to his companion as he made a seat for her on a folded plaid; "particularly after his good-nature last night. It's not often you find a man of his age so willing to exert himself for other people's pleasure. It was

so perfectly evident, too, that there was no vanity about it."

"No, papa isn't vain," Alice assented. Considering his habitual courtesy, it was odd that Mark still so persisted in ignoring her share in the performance, and odder still that the omission did not seem to disappoint her in the least. "And he's generally very good-natured, though rather inclined to be capricious. I have known him refuse to sing a note, when most persons would have been glad of the occasion for display, and where requests passed for commands. He was disinterested, too, last night, for he could scarcely have reckoned on his reward so soon. I never asked him a question, I assure you; but I guessed by his face this morning that he had his piquet before going to bed. Was I wrong?"

"Perfectly right. And perhaps you guessed, too, that he left off a good winner?"

"No; my gifts don't go so far. I have asked the question of his face often; and it has very seldom answered me. I am afraid he would not be less grateful to you—or whoever it was that made up his *partie*—if he got up a loser. It was you, I feel certain."

"Right again," Mark answered; "but why do

you say afraid? I rather admire the *grand seigneur* way of accepting bad luck, you know."

She smiled very sadly, and her head drooped a little.

"I have good reason to say 'afraid.' We are too poor to play the *grand seigneur*, either at home or abroad. I'm not a bit ashamed of speaking frankly to you, Mr. Ramsay, though I suppose I ought to be. I have no idea what stakes you were playing for last night—nominal ones, I daresay. It always begins so."

Her head drooped lower and lower.

"I don't ask you not to tempt him to play deep—I'm sure you wouldn't do that—but I do beseech you—O, so earnestly!—not to be tempted yourself. Can you promise me this? You can't imagine what a rest it is to lie down at night not in fear and trembling; and I did hope for that rest here."

"I would promise a much harder thing," Mark answered, bending over her. "We only played for sovereigns last night: the stakes shall not be increased if I can help it; and I can help it, I feel sure. I always used to avoid high play under my own roof, even in the old days; and Captain Irving can't have much worse gambling sins to answer for than I, though he may have more."

Her face as she lifted it was grave still, though not sad.

"There are very, very few like him. I would almost as soon—don't ask me why—that he should lose as win heavily. Gambling runs in the blood, like any other madness, I suppose; it runs in ours assuredly. If it had not been for the law of entail, Drumour would have passed away from us long, long ago. Did you ever read, or hear of, that horrible story of a man setting his wife's honour on a cast when he had no other stake left, and losing—and paying? Duncan Irving did all this when he was in exile in Holland with Charles II., and added a double murder to the shame. The direct line ends with us; for my father has no child living but me: so perhaps the curse will be abated. Let us drop the subject, please. I'm so glad I had courage to speak out; I shall feel quite safe now both at Kenlis and Drumour."

"Yes, you are quite safe with *me*," Mark said very quietly; nevertheless there was something in his look that brought the colour out brightly on Alice's cheek, and sent her eyes earthwards again.

Neither, so long as converse was permissible, was there silence in the other stands, save in that one where Mr. Brancepeth sate with his loader—he still stuck to his favourite Purdeys—a saturnine

Scot, whose garrulity was limited to "Mark right," "Mark left;" or a gruff "Gude wark," after a peculiarly creditable shot.

La Reine Gaillarde and her cavalier were in great amity this morning, and were talking of old Marlshire times quite confidentially.

"What an utter fool I made of myself," the Colonel confessed with great frankness; "and what a nice example I set my youngsters! It must have been great fun for you all to watch me, though. Do you remember the meet at Pinkerton Wood?"

"I should think I did remember it. You quite spoiled our hunting that day—Blanche's, I mean, and mine—with the fright you gave us. I have never looked at the Swarle since without a sort of shiver. What became of The Plunger, by the bye?"

"He went up to Tattersall's with the rest," Vane answered; "and I got a plaintive note soon afterwards from the man who bought him, asking me how he was to ride him. Cool that, wasn't it? I wrote back that the brute only wanted humouring; but I didn't give my horses characters for anything but soundness. So she was frightened a little? I shouldn't have thought it likely. Well, I bear no malice, God knows, to her, or her husband either. Perhaps it was for the best, after all. If she had

said 'Yes' instead of 'No,' I should never have suited her as he seems to do. They are perfectly happy; don't you think so?"

"Wonderfully happy, if it only lasts," she answered rather gravely. "So you actually did propose? I always guessed as much, though I never could make that little wretch own it. It's pleasant to be able to talk over old times comfortably: but we mustn't chatter any more. If you don't shoot quite up to the mark, it won't be any fault of mine; my sympathies are against the birds to-day."

For the first time since his arrival Alsager found himself alone with his hostess. He was rather glad of the opportunity of improving their acquaintance; for his first liking for Blanche had much strengthened of late, and he fancied that the favourable impression was to a certain extent mutual.

"Wouldn't that make a good sketch?" Vere observed, after they had duly complimented the weather.

He pointed to a ravine on their right, widening into a glen as it trended down to the loch, so that a broad strip of clear water filled up the background.

"I was just thinking so," she returned; "but I can only admire points of view, unluckily. It's very different with you, Mr. Alsager. I'm sure you

have not left your paints and brushes behind you in the South."

"They would be of little use here. I, too, can only admire still life. I never could accomplish a landscape worth the framing, and I can't afford to spoil canvas. I can manage a recognisable portrait now and then; for I've a sort of knack of catching expressions that please me, though I may fail in bringing out the features. Do you know, Mrs. Ramsay, I thought of asking you to indulge me with a sitting on the first hopelessly bad day? The rain-gauge will come to its level before long, depend upon it."

"I'm very much flattered, of course," Blanche answered; "but it would be rather a waste of talent whilst such a much better model is available."

Alsager smiled, as he followed her glance till it rested on a figure in the extreme left-hand stand.

"You're quite right; it is a superb model for a master *du genre*. Boulanger, for instance, would go leagues to paint her. But I'm not a master—only a mild amateur, with more than my share of professional whims. I said, if you remember, that I could sometimes catch expressions that please me. I'm not quite sure that Miss Irving's comes into that category."

The wonder in her face was not affected.

"What can you find to cavil at? I was quite struck by the sweetness of her expression the first time we saw her; and it is a beauty that grows on you."

"Very sweet," he said, still smiling, "and perhaps a little—ever so little—subtle. At any rate, it's beyond me. I could listen to her—or, better still, to her and her father—for hours with my eyes shut; and it would be ungrateful to caricature her. So, if you don't condescend to sit to me, my brushes will lie idle—no great loss, either, to the world in general."

Much of the coquettish leaven that had made Blanche Ellerslie so dangerous lingered still in Blanche Ramsay. She was pleased by the preference assuredly, and showed this; but the next minute her glance reverted somewhat wistfully to that group on the left.

"Artists are not to be contradicted," she said; "so I suppose you must have your way; but I think that even Mark would pity your taste. He *must* admire her, I'm certain, though he's never fairly owned it yet."

It was a question, though not a direct one, and so Vere interpreted it. For a little while he doubted within himself whether those words were spoken in simplicity, or with a purpose of entrapping him.

Taking the charitable view, at last, he answered quite frankly:

"Yes, I fancy he must admire her; though I only speak by conjecture. Mark is not expansive at any time; and on the present occasion I haven't detected even a spark of enthusiasm. He called me a fanatic only last night for speaking of Miss Irving's voice—well, not a bit more highly than it deserved."

There was a long pause. Then Blanche said softly:

"You are such a very, very old friend of Mark's, Mr. Alsager, that I can hardly realise you and I were strangers six months ago. That is why I am going to ask you something that you need not answer unless you like. Do you think I make him really—thoroughly—happy?"

Vere Alsager had little charity for his kind to spare; but if, without power to help or warn, he had been forced to watch the hungry sea swallowing up, inch by inch, the rock on which a fair woman lay sleeping, it is likely that he would have been affected by some such thrill of compassion as he felt then, looking down on Blanche Ramsay. Nevertheless, he answered as cheerfully as if he saw no peril in the future.

"Our oldest friends don't carry windows in their

breasts; but, speaking according to my own light, I think you may feel quite at ease on that point. You have read that old story of Polycrates' ring? Well, I actually suggested some such set-off against good luck to Mark not a week ago, and his chief objection to it was, if I remember right, that there was nothing he should miss sufficiently, except—his wife."

A bright glow of pleasure possessed her face for a second or two. Then it grew pensive again, as she repeated under her breath,

"Not a week ago!"

Much to Vere's relief, "Mark over!" came down the wind just then, and stopped the converse for the present.

To chronicle the sport at length, if it did not savour of vain repetition, would be pains thrown away. To such as have approved them the sketch would seem colourless and faint; to such as know them not, no word-painting would worthily set forth the various delights—never quite, though so nearly the same—of a clear August day so spent in Wilderness. The patient upward climb through glen and corrie, till the last brae is breasted and the posts attained—the rest just long enough to steady the nerves again amidst great peace, which is not stillness; for there is never stillness on the moorland

while curlew and plover are awake, or the western breeze is stirring—the tingle of the pulse at the first whirr of coming wings—the self-approval when each shot is followed by a dull thud, and through the smoke of the second barrel you look for the crumpled heap of feathers that was a brave grouse-cock a second ago—the comparing of notes after the drive is done, when our elaborate defence of that palpable miss finds no favour with a jury of our compeers, who will never allow that sun or cloud could possibly have interfered in any aim but their own—the nooning, in the shadow of a “brindled rock” within reach of the hill-spring that, where it soaks through the moss, makes russet emerald—the conquest over a wolfish appetite and intense thirst, achieved with a view to straight powder thereafter—then the leisurely walk or ride that brings us home again; when the last pipe is flavoured by a comfortable consciousness of having done to death a certain number of one’s fellow-creatures, in the merciful fashion that leaves few halt or maimed. Looking back on such a day in after-time, from the midst of work or worry, are you not prone to murmur

Quando ullum inveniẽm parem?

It is sufficient to say that the drive was voted the completest success by everyone concerned therein,

either as actor or spectator; and that the whole party returned in great spirit to the castle, where they found the Solitary in a state of tranquil beatitude.

"I'm ashamed to say how much I've enjoyed myself," he said. "I like poking about old places above all things, and I haven't exhausted Kenlis yet."

Perhaps it was on this account that Irving needed so little pressing to prolong his visit. After dinner they had music, of course, of a more desultory kind than on the evening before; and there was a good deal of confidential chat—people pairing off, much as they had done on the hill-side. Excitement and unwonted exercise acting on a delicate frame may fairly account for fatigue; but, with all this given in, Blanche wondered, as she laid her head on her pillow that night, why she felt so very, very weary.

END OF VOL. I.

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Lawrence, George Alfred

Breaking a butterfly; or, Blanche Ellerslie's Ending

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